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His search took him down strange trails—
into the arms of an evil woman

HANGTREE COUNTRY

Eric Allen

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"US CALDEENS ARE PROUD MEN, BUCK," RUBE SAID

"Maybe we got too much Cherokee blood—but we feel a very special way about our women.

"I had to kill Murch after what he did to Sally—make sure he couldn't talk," Rube went on. "He ran and I put every slug I had into his back.

"If anybody knows why I shot Murch, you're going to have to kill him, Buck—kill for the pride of the Caldeens.

"I've killed for it—that's why they're hanging me this morning."

HANGTREE COUNTRY

ERIC ALLEN

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Prologue

He crossed the flooded channel of Polecat Creek and sent his horse up the first long swell of the foothills. The trail climbed steadily southward through oaks and stunted pines. When he struck the Bellefonte Road at the summit of Eagle Mountain, he turned in his saddle once without slowing and looked back.

The trail was like a cast-off lasso, threading its sinuous way down through the tasseled red-oaks toward the turn in the flooded creek. Cloud-shadows moved on the hills like ghosts of old cavalry columns, drawing his dark glance with them across the graveyard at Bellefonte Church.

They would bury Nate Partain there, Buck Caldeen thought, and he pulled his breath in deep and faced ahead again and kept his big horse traveling.

It was sundown when he rode into Longtown, Indian Territory, and tied up at Will Payne's store. He went in and turned his gun over to Will, and sent word to Brad King, the Deputy U. S. Marshal, that he was waiting to be taken to jail.

He sat on the store porch and smoked and waited, watching the approach of dusky darkness while the last surges of that violent reaction drained out of him. When he saw Brad King ride in, he flipped his cigarette out to the dust of the street and stood up.

The marshal halted and dismounted unhurriedly and came up the stoop of the porch. King's eyes, gray and cool and yet filled with a sharp perception, moved around Buck's waist in search of a weapon. Buck noticed King's moment

of hesitation, and knew the marshal was remembering Rube.

"What's this I hear, Buck?" King asked.

Buck Caldeen offered his wrists for handcuffs and answered quietly, "I killed Nate Partain, Brad."

Will Payne said hurriedly from the doorway, "Buck turned his gun over to me, Brad. He's giving up voluntarily."

King nodded curtly in acknowledgment and kept ignoring Buck's proffered hands. "We'll have supper of canned oysters and crackers before we ride, Buck," he said.

Will Payne brought the food out and Buck and the marshal ate together, then King rose and gestured toward their horses. They left the store porch and mounted and turned out onto the Fort Smith road.

The night settled clear and moonless, and the soft spring wind carried the smoke from dwindling brush fires and the smell of freshly-turned land. Buck absorbed every sound and smell in the darkness, shamed that his own bitterness had made him hate this country lately. Now that he realized he might never return to the hills, he was aware of a love for them greater than he had ever known.

Brad King rode quietly beside him until they passed the Pleasant Grove church-house and turned south on the road leading through Remy. Then the marshal slowed his horse and said with a muted urgency, "You had to have a good reason, Buck. If you don't mind talking, I'd like to know what it was."

Buck slowed also, dreading the marshal's questions. "A reason doesn't excuse a man, does it, Brad?" he said evasively. "Not here in the jurisdiction of Judge Parker."

King turned slowly in his saddle. "It's bad business, all right, when a man kills another in Indian Territory. Where did it happen?"

"In Partain's front yard."

"What kind of plea will you make, Buck?"

"I hadn't thought much about that, Brad. I suppose I'll plead self-defense. He did pull his gun on me."

King brought his horse to a standstill and lifted a restraining hand. "You ought to have more sense than that, Buck! If you killed him in his own front yard, a self-defense plea won't hold water."

Buck said wearily, "I guess not, Brad."

King said with a strained impatience, "You aren't like your brother Rube was, Buck. Rube was arrogant, unruly, always champing at the bit. Knowing the kind of man you

are, I can't understand this. Did you kill Nate Partain because he warned you to stay away from Nora Garland?"

"No."

King settled in his saddle and made a brief gesture, and they rode on again while the night sounds lifted around them. A mocking-bird trilled its waning song from the top of a hickory tree near the roadside, and the resonant calling of whippoorwills made a constant rippling in the woods along Remy Branch. Far to the east, a wolf-pack in full cry struck down from the shoulder of Marshal Mountain and dipped into the long dark hollow threaded by Garrison Creek.

They neared the scattered lights of Remy and left the road with one accord when approaching hoofbeats sounded. They waited behind a screen of willows, listening while the horses crossed the branch. A group of Indians appeared, riding two abreast and straight and distinct in their saddles. Buck saw the glint of starlight on the crossed pins they were wearing on their hunting shirts, and he knew they were members of the secret Cherokee society known as the "Kee-too-wah."

Buck and King stayed motionless, but the Indians sensed their presence. It showed in the perceptible slowing of their horses and the sudden hawk-like tilting of their heads. They flowed past wtih a strong current of awareness emanating from them and became specters in the night.

Buck watched them go and thought how many years distant was the Civil War, and yet how close its aftermath in the hills of the Cherokee Nation. Rivalry still existed between the "Pins" and the "Knights of the Golden Circle." The ashes of Stand Watie's council fires still smouldered and there was heat-lightning in the eyes of the old followers of Chief John Ross.

Buck Caldeen followed automatically as King rode on, but from that moment his mind was caught up in intermittent flashes of memory. They took the cut-off trail at the edge of Remy and went past Looney Springs and his memories intensified. Almost as plain as if it had been the night before, in his mind he could see the fire at Nora Garland's camp and the taunting, brazen face of Nate Partain.

They struck the main road again at the crest of Mayfield Mountain. Street lights of Fort Smith appeared in the distance. They followed the road down to the lowlands and on past the homes of white settlers along the river. They crossed

the river on the ferry and reined up the muddy street to the Fort Smith Federal Jail.

The clock in the jailer's quarters was striking midnight as Buck Caldeen was booked for murder.

"I'll send Bruce Warren to see you, Buck," King said. "If your case has any angles, that lawyer will drag them out."

Buck nodded quietly.

"I'll take your horse back to Longtown, too," King said. "He'll be taken care of."

"Thanks, Brad."

They shook hands and the marshal left him and the jailer locked Buck in.

At daybreak, Buck Caldeen still hadn't gone to sleep.

There were three steel cages across the corridor from him and the men inside them had been awake all night. The prisoner in the right-hand cage, a gray-haired man with bony, sloping shoulders, was kneeling in a corner, silently praying. In the center cell was a walking skeleton of a man, pacing endlessly like a wolf in a zoo enclosure. To the left in a larger cell a man sat at a small table shuffling cards.

Suddenly the man in the center cell stopped his pacing and looked at the small barred window. He said in a tight, strained voice, "It's coming daylight, Jake."

Jake shoved back his cards and stood up. He was a thin-faced man, pale, almost scholarly. His eyes were a pale shade of blue and slightly protuberant. "Sure," he said. He looked across at Buck. "It's coming daylight, mister. Didn't you hear Pete say it?"

Buck nodded.

Jake started breathing fast and his eyes looked a little crazy.

"I want to tell you something, mister," Jake said. "Pretty soon the guards'll tramp in here and drag us out . . . me and Pete and Old Praying Mantis there in the corner . . . and they'll hang the three of us, all at one quick drop!"

The shine in Jake's eyes and the twist of his lips disturbed Buck Caldeen. He began to wonder how it would be with him when his time came up. He did not have any illusions. Unless Sally Youngbird faced the court and told her sordid story, Buck would hang.

He thought of his brother George and knew he never wanted her to tell that story. There were some things worse than death.

Buck turned to the window and looked out at the squalid

houses of the Coke Hill district, and on beyond that squatter's domain across the flat, somber run of the river. On the Cherokee Nation side he could see the houses of Moffett, that gambler's stronghold that hard-drinking men had dubbed "Little Juarez."

Strange, Buck thought, that while passing Till Petrie's gambling hall last night, he had not thought of Wynona Mapen. He looked beyond the town to the far uplift of hills that marked the beginning of Indian country, and suddenly knew why it was. Wynona was of the hills and always would be, and he could never associate her with a sordid background.

Suddenly she was a hurting presence in and around him, and even when he tried to shut her out, all he could see in his mind was her lifted face with sad, accusing eyes, and her small feet in high-heeled button shoes, running away from him through the trees.

I lost her once, he thought, because I couldn't believe in her. Now I want her, no matter what she is or what she has been. I want her and I can never have her. I'm caught up close.

He had met her five years after his return from the War, and she had fired his dreams and ambitions until that final moment when he had let frustration and jealousy consume him. He had gone away again, carrying bitterness in his heart. He had tried to lose the thought of her during five long years of roaming; but now he knew those years might just as well never have been.

Lost to his mind now were the cattle drives and the mining camps and the seductive, painted women; the ornate bars and the gambling halls from Ellsworth to the logging towns of Oregon. Whatever lure those far places at first had held had been obscured by a constant longing that had brought him back to the hills at last across two thousand miles of country.

Buck Caldeen stood at the window of the Fort Smith Federal Jail and knew there was nothing left for him now but memories. He looked westward across the river, and he was oblivious to Jake and Pete and Old Praying Mantis. His mind was locked in the past, and he was seeing himself one year ago, riding on the familiar road toward home. . . .

One

He had traveled this road with Pike's Recruits, riding to fight the Yankees. He had been young and eager for conflict then, but the years had shaped and changed him. He had witnessed much of violence during his life, and at times had courted it, but its appeal had dwindled.

"Violence," Buck Caldeen mused, "was made for the young and arrogant."

He smiled with the thought, and reflected, as he had so often of late, that he was no longer young. He was crowding thirty and every year was plainly stamped upon him. He was a tall, square-built man with a high-cheeked, slightly aquiline face that revealed his Cherokee strain. His eyes were dark and set wide apart, and he had remained clean-shaven in a land of bearded men.

He had returned to Fort Smith by train and stage coach, and had bought this big roan horse at Hare's Livery on Texas Road. He had thought the roan was a bargain at the time he got it; and now, five miles away from the ferry, he was certain of it. The big horse was devoid of fancy gaits, but it had a reaching stride that ate up the miles without damaging a man's mid-section. Buck had a feeling that the horse had come from the Low Gap country. It showed in the roan's steady, unswerving travel toward the hills.

Buck looked at the land along the river and was surprised at the way it had changed. Vast stretches of this once heavily-timbered bottom had been cleared and drained, and farm houses lined the Albert Pike Road as far as the first stage station. Early corn was up to a good height, and the fields

on either side of the road were alive with Negroes driving mule teams.

Buck turned due north after passing the log stage depot. Mayfield Mountain stood high and clear in the waning sunlight, only three miles ahead. It was dusky dark when the big roan started climbing. A cooler, cleaner wind touched Buck Caldeen's face and he drew it in, savoring it as something lost and yearned for and finally retrieved again. All the weariness of long travel went out of him. He was conscious of nothing save a mounting exuberance and the smell of the evening wind.

He checked the roan at the top of Mayfield Mountain and looked back once, but he was barely aware of seeing the lights of Fort Smith; and the sound of a steamboat's whistle was like a vague, elusive echo outside his mind. His thoughts were winging northward, past Longtown and Eagle Mountain, across Polecat Creek and Little Lee's Creek and on into the Low Gap hills beyond.

He nudged the roan and took the cut-off trail, and dark walls of timber rose close on either hand. The first stars twinkled and the wind died down. The roan horse lengthened its pace. The trail dipped down and lifted again, and Buck saw the glow of firelight. He smiled, remembering the old days. Someone was camping at Looney Springs.

The roan snorted softly and jiggled the bit, signaling its desire for water. Buck let the horse turn from the trail of its own free will and halt at the moss-grown spill below the springs. Then he dismounted and slipped the bit and stood looking toward the campfire.

He saw the red-wheeled hack and the covered wagon, and the horses grazing on the lush hill grass. He saw the two Indian women stooping over the campfire, and beyond them, lounging against a wheel of the wagon, the white man. The white man was looking at Buck.

Buck saw the white woman at that same instant, and his interest centered upon her. She came out of the shadows and stepped across the tongue of the wagon and stopped there, looking at the white man. She was tall and sedate, and she was obviously aware of the picture she made in the glow of firelight. She was wearing widow's weeds.

She followed the white man's gaze and saw Buck. She made a small frightened sound and clutched the white man's shoulders.

The two Indian women at the campfire stood up suddenly and looked at Buck and one of them began to scream.

It was a high, keening wail that startled the horses beyond the wagon and made Buck's roan lift its head. It ended with a soft, breathless note of happiness, and then the Indian woman started walking toward Buck.

Buck's glance was swift and all-inclusive. He saw the white man straighten and push the white woman's hands from his shoulders.

"Minnie!" the white man said hoarsely, "that man isn't Rube!"

The Indian woman paused as she neared Buck. Her hands were locked tightly under her bosom and her bare brown feet made a restless stirring against the leaves. Her face was a stoical shadow and her eyes luminous sloe-black pools.

She looked at Buck intently for a moment, then turned and hurried back to the campfire. She knelt there and glanced up at the white man, and her voice came to Buck distinctly when she spoke.

"No," she said. "No, him not Rube."

The white man had a solid stride, swift and determined. He came on and halted perhaps ten paces away. He was of medium height, wearing spurless boots and a flat-crowned hat, and a dark serge suit with a white shirt and black string tie. His stance was belligerent, and his voice held a drunken thickness.

"Who are you, mister?" he said. "One of that damned Caldeen bunch?"

Buck released the reins of the roan and went toward the white man. Strange, he thought, even as he moved, how it was when you first met a man and hatred for him suddenly struck you. Something churned up inside you at the sound of a man's voice and the way he looked, and hatred was all there was.

The white man took a sideward step and his right hand brushed back his coat tail.

"Don't do that, fellow!" Buck Caldeen warned. There was very little space between them, and Buck's lithe stride soon spanned that. He had long since learned that indecision got men killed. He had his hand on his gun when he halted.

"I'm Buck Caldeen," he said to the white man. "I'm Rube's brother. Who're you?"

"Nate Partain."

Buck released his gun and said coolly, "All right, Nate.

I've been gone a long time, and any kind of civil talk you make is welcome. You sounded like you don't much care for the Caldeens, though. Why?"

Partain's eyes had a shining brilliance even here in the close half-dark. "I didn't say anything, Caldeen. You just showed up quick, and startled the ladies. I'm escorting Mrs. Garland and her friends to Fort Smith. They're leary of strangers. I just asked you a question, that's all."

"Who is the Indian woman?"

"You must be like Rube, the way you fly off the handle. I . . ."

"Let it ride, Nate! I'm asking you a question now. Is that Indian woman Rube's wife?"

Nate Partain laughed, but he cut it off quickly. He stared hard at the butt of Buck Caldeen's gun. Mrs. Garland's voice came shrilling through the instant of silence.

"Mr. Partain! Who is that man?"

Nate Partain turned, his face darkly etched in profile against the bright orange flare of firelight. "Come and meet him, Mrs. Garland," he said. "I suppose he'll be your neighbor."

She waited a moment, then called uneasily, "I'm afraid it wouldn't be quite proper . . . you know . . . meeting strangers, so soon after . . ."

Nate said brazenly, "He won't make any trouble. If he does, I'll handle him."

Buck's eyes flicked at Nate. Suddenly he knew the source of his hatred. That was the kind of man Nate Partain was, and Buck had sensed it at the beginning. Nate was taunting, brazen until the chips were down, and then he began welching; then, after he thought danger to himself had passed, he started throwing his brash talk again. Buck had known the same trait in a bully at school years ago, and the memory came back to gall him.

Buck chose to let it pass, and he turned to watch the widow, though his attention never entirely left Nate Partain. Whatever reluctance Mrs. Garland at first had felt, Buck thought, had left her quickly. She lifted her skirt and made her swift advance and stopped beside Nate Partain. She let the hem of her skirt fall back around her ankles and stared at Buck; and Buck Caldeen read her instantly and knew her manner of fear was feigned.

"You're a Caldeen," she said. "I know you are. You look like Rube."

Buck nodded and thought to doff his hat, though the urge to do so was not strong in him. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Garland," he said. "I'm Buck, Rube's brother."

"What were you trying to do to Mr. Partain?"

Nate Partain laughed mockingly. "He pulled his gun and tried to scare me, Mrs. Garland."

She let her eyes go wide. "For what earthly reason? You ought to be ashamed, Mr. Caldeen!"

Buck glanced at his roan and saw that the horse was still standing patiently. He pulled his hat down and brushed past Nate Partain and Mrs. Garland. He heard the widow's sharp protest behind him, but he ignored it and quietly approached the two Indian women.

The one who had walked out to meet him was kneeling over a skillet of cooking meat, her coarse black hair falling in braids about her shoulders. She did not look up as Buck stopped beside her.

The other one was standing, and Buck saw that she was short and full-bodied and young. Her hair was caught back and tied with a scarlet ribbon. She was wearing a gaudy-colored dress and beads and earrings, and her dark eyes showed a frank, appraising interest in Buck.

Buck said to the kneeling woman, "You thought I was Rube Caldeen. I'm Rube's brother. What does Rube mean to you?"

"Rube my man," she answered. "I Rube's woman." She lifted the skillet from the fire and stood up and gestured with her other hand to the young one. "Sally is some day George's woman, too."

The young one giggled and turned her head away briefly. Then she straightened and faced Buck and waited for his approval.

"That is good," Buck said. As always when in the presence of Indian women, he was aware of a vague frustration because there was not enough Cherokee blood in him to make him fully understand them. Or perhaps even a full-blood could not, he thought. He waited a moment, then asked firmly, "How is Rube? How is George? Are they all right?"

The eyes of Rube's woman got very still, and for a moment there was no sound except the humming of insects around the fire and the gurgle of water spilling from the springs. Then, before the Indian woman answered, Buck heard Nate Partain and the widow coming up behind him.

He turned to face them and caught the full impact of Mrs. Garland's indignant stare.

"Stop pestering my charges!" she said sharply. "They're torn up enough, especially Minnie. I think you'd better leave."

"After one question," Buck Caldeen said, "What has happened to Rube?"

"Hasn't Minnie Youngbird told you?"

"No."

Nate Partain was close to Buck and his breath was laden with the smell of whiskey. His voice was like the brutal thrust of a saber.

"You sweat that question out, Caldeen. You're a smart one, but you'll have a lot of things to sweat out if you stay here. Get used to it."

Minnie Youngbird came close to Buck and laid a hand against his shoulder. She pushed him urgently and pointed with her other hand toward his horse.

"You go now," she said. "You go see George. He tell you. This man here, he good man, but he no like Rube."

Buck sensed the urgency in her and suddenly felt a strange affinity between them, unspoken, elusive, yet strong enough to sway him. He started toward his horse.

"If you must know, Mr. Caldeen," the widow said coldly, "your brother's in jail for murder."

Buck stopped and turned. "Rube?" he said. "In jail where?"

"At Fort Smith," Mrs. Garland answered. "He killed an Indian agent. He will never be free again. I'm taking his . . . I'm taking Minnie Youngbird and her sister to the jail to see him."

Nate Partain laughed, and the sound of his laughter threw a harsher weight than the force of the widow's words. Buck took an involuntary step toward Partain, then caught himself and stood looking searchingly at the widow. He asked flatly, "Why did Rube kill an Indian agent?"

Nate Partain moved close to Buck, his laughter fading and his eyes throwing out their whiskey-brightened challenge. He jerked a thumb toward Minnie Youngbird and said mockingly, "Why don't you ask Rube's . . . shall we call her *wife?*"

Buck Caldeen's hatred suddenly burst its bounds and flowed out of him violently. He jumped at Nate Partain and hit him right-handed flush against the face. Partain made a

staggering half-circle and sagged back against a wheel of the wagon. His eyes were muddled, and blood tinged the corner of his mouth.

The widow went to him quickly and caught his right arm. "No, Mr. Partain, don't try to do anything," she said. She looked at Buck and her eyes were bright with a new awareness of him, and filled also with a subtle mockery of Nate Partain. She turned to face Minnie Youngbird, but she spoke to Buck. "You should do as Minnie said, Mr. Caldeen, don't you think?"

Buck hesitated and saw her face go thin and shrewish, and watched the sharp, gimlet probing take shape in her eyes. "Minnie!" she said, "you and Sally get in the wagon! I've put myself out to make this trip with you two. I don't intend to have any more trouble!"

Buck said quickly to the Indian woman, "You tell Rube I'll come to see him, Minnie. Tomorrow, or tomorrow night, after I've talked with George."

Minnie Youngbird nodded mutely and caught her sister's arm. They turned and went toward the wagon. Minnie glanced at Nate Partain once, and Buck noticed her fleeting smile.

Buck watched Nate Partain for a moment, then turned and reached his roan and mounted. When he looked back toward the wagon, Nate was walking around it into the shadows, but the widow was still staring at Buck. She had moved so that the firelight threw her body into distinct relief, and he noticed the small, inadequate swell of her bosom and the long, thin line of her throat. Something about her pose brought compassion up in him.

"I can't say that this meeting has been a pleasure, ma'am," he said, and lifted his hat to her. "But I hope the next one may be. Don't you?"

The widow was capable of being shocked. Buck saw that much before he rode away.

He let the roan strike a rapid pace, conscious of his own sudden urgency. He felt the knuckles of his right hand and found that he could not shake off thoughts of Nate Partain.

He reached down and rubbed the neck of the roan, letting the feel of warmth and life go through him. He felt a stark need for something to put down the malignant thing inside him. I could kill Nate Partain, he thought, and I don't want that kind of hatred. I'll have to meet him again when

he's sober and learn to know him. I need to wipe this hatred out.

Gradually some of the hard, tight constriction left his vitals and he settled in the saddle, picturing his brother Rube in his mind as he rode.

A big man, Rube Caldeen, taciturn and powerful, his face showing more Indian strain than either Buck or George. Rube had continued guerilla raiding along the Arkansas border for two years after the close of the Civil War, and had been captured at last and had spent a year in prison. He had come out a bitter, chip-on-the-shoulder kind of man, extremely partial to Indians and ready to fight for them at the drop of a hat. He had never joined either the "Pins" or the "Knights of the Golden Circle," but he had made a lot of enemies among white settlers, especially those who favored the North.

And George . . . Buck doubted if he would recognize his younger brother. Five years made a lot of difference in a growing boy. George had been fourteen when Buck had gone out West—a slow-moving kid, awkward and ill at ease in the presence of company. The upheaval of the War had warped his childhood and had left him uncertain and afraid. Buck had been more reluctant to leave George than any of the rest of his family.

Buck remembered the words of the Indian woman, Minnie Youngbird. "Sally is some day George's woman, too," Minnie had said. Evidently, Rube had already taken an Indian woman without benefit of marriage. It had always seemed a bad thing to Buck, and yet he felt powerless to stop George from doing the same thing if he chose to follow Rube's footsteps. The only thing was, he could not picture George taking advantage of anyone, least of all a woman.

Buck rode into the edge of Longtown under the deep darkness of midnight, hearing the soughing of wind in scattered maples. Lights were out, and the buildings were the same forlorn shapes he remembered from other nights in his boyhood, when, returning from Fort Smith in the wagon with his father, he had seen the town darkened and quiet.

The hooves of his roan made a hollow drumming across the planks of the bridge spanning the branch. Dogs aroused and rushed at the horse, angry, clamorous, and from a pallet somewhere in a back yard a man's voice called sharply, "Ring! Come back here, Ring!" Buck neared the intersection of Main Street and saw the Bellefonte Road stretching like

a thin, taut ribbon straight ahead. He slowed, drawing in the smells of the settlement and feeling the old nostalgia rising. At that moment he saw the light.

Will Payne's store was open. Lamplight spilled softly through the doorway, revealing a riderless horse standing near the porch. Some customer from the hills had come late for groceries, Buck thought, and smiled in the darkness. The Paynes, old friends of the Caldeens, had always been accommodating people.

An urge to talk to Will Payne grew strong in Buck Caldeen. The storekeeper could give him a fair and impartial account of Rube's trouble. Buck turned the roan into the dirt road that served as Main Street and approached the store.

He drew up at the porch and dismounted, noticing idly as he did so that the other horse was rigged with a plaited rawhide bridle and a woman's side-saddle. Some squaw, Buck thought, making a midnight errand for a lazy husband. Buck hesitated about trusting the roan, then made his decision and left it with trailing reins. He climbed the stoop and crossed the porch and went in.

He saw Will Payne bending over a ledger behind the counter, holding a pencil poised in his hand. The storekeeper glanced up idly, then straightened quickly and stared.

"Buck Caldeen!" he said.

But suddenly Buck was not looking at the storekeeper. Standing outside the counter in front of Will, her face in profile, was the woman. She was not an Indian. Buck recognized her even before she turned to face him. He was looking at Wynona Mapen.

Two

BUCK CALDEEN HAD KNOWN, WHILE CROSSING TWO THOUsand miles of country, that he would meet her. He had lived in his imagination every possible way to meet her, but now he was not prepared for it.

He was conscious of a barely perceptible break in his stride, but he fought for composure and absorbed the shock of her presence and went on toward her. He watched the surprise cross her face and fade out under an almost deathly stillness, and sight of that stillness warmed through him like a Chinook wind in the Rockies. He stopped.

She still cared, he thought, but he had to remember that she was a married woman. He took off his hat and forced a smile, reminding himself that he had known many women and that it was foolish to feel this disturbance. He said quietly, "How are you, Wynona?"

The stillness broke on her face and she came to him suddenly. He had the strange feeling that she would rush into his arms. She checked herself abruptly and offered her hand. He took it.

"Buck Caldeen!" she whispered.

She drew her hand away and stepped back from him, looking at him as if to satisfy herself that he was solid flesh. She turned and sent a reaching look at Will Payne and said happily, "Mr. Payne, aren't you surprised to see him?"

"I reckon!" Will Payne said feelingly. He leaned across the counter and thrust out his hand. "It's good to see you, Buck."

Buck shook hands with him. "The same back to you,

Will," he said. "How is Sara . . . and all the rest of the family?"

"Fine, Buck. You?"

"I'm all right."

They looked at each other steadily, measuringly, and each felt the strong current of the old friendship come alive between them. Then, sensing that Wynona had been temporarily shut out from them, Buck turned to her and asked casually, "How is Kimes?"

He had know before he spoke that there was no bitterness in him. Somewhere he had lost it, and he wanted to tell her so; but whatever he might have said to her in private could not be spoken in front of Will Payne. But she took too long about answering, and kept looking at him intently, searching him for a trace of that bitterness. She waited so long, he thought she wouldn't speak.

"He . . . isn't so good," she answered at last, and her eyes moved fleetingly toward Will Payne. "Is our transaction complete, then, Mr. Payne?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Good-bye, then." She removed a pair of soft kid gloves from the pocket of her riding skirt and put them on. She turned toward the door, then turned back. "Are you going on home tonight, Buck?"

"Sometime tonight, yes."

"I hoped so. Your mother is very ill."

"You mean, seriously so?"

"Yes."

"Thanks for telling me, Wynona."

She went out quickly, her footsteps making a steady cadence across the porch and down the stoop outside. Buck looked at Will Payne, but he kept listening while the sound of a bit chain came to him, then the faint creaking of saddle leather and the clopping of her horse's hooves taking the Bellefonte Road.

Payne said abruptly, "That was a break you made there about Kimes Montague, Buck. Did you do that deliberately? Or didn't you know?"

"Know what?"

"Kimes has been in jail for three months," Payne answered. "Federal officers picked him up for trafficking in dope."

"Kimes Montague? Smuggling dope?" Buck couldn't keep the astonishment out of his voice.

Payne said bleakly, "Kimes turned into a rotten derelict that the devil himself couldn't associate with."

Buck absorbed that knowledge slowly, amazed at the reaction it brought in him. He had left this country hating Kimes Montague and everything he stood for . . . Kimes and his constant talk of elite things, his cynicism and his half-hearted efforts to capture Indian lore and Territorial history and place them in the pages of a book. Kimes had come in as a stranger, and his advent had been a blight that had shriveled and made lifeless all of Buck Caldeen's dreams. Yet, now in this moment when Will Payne spoke of Kimes Montague's downfall, Buck could feel no sense of elation, of triumph. All he could feel was sorrow for Wynona Mapen . . . Wynona Mapen in his mind still, because he had never been able to think of her as having the name of Wynona Montague, even after she had married Kimes.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Will," Buck said.

Will Payne nodded. "It's bad, Buck. It's bad for her."

"Does she live with her family now?"

Will Payne laughed coldly. "She always has. They never moved out, no time after they married. He's a worthless son-of-a-gun, Buck. I didn't know that once. I know it now."

Buck waited a moment, watching the fireflies making their erratic streaks in the darkness beyond the doorway. "Why do you say it's bad, then, for her?"

"It isn't good for a woman like Wynona to be without a man, Buck. You know her. She always had a wild streak. She could go bad."

Buck said softly, dangerously, "You shouldn't make a remark like that, Will, even to a friend. Not unless you know more than I know about women."

Payne said flatly, "You didn't trust her once."

Buck tipped his head slightly. "No. But that was because I was foolish. I didn't think they'd marry. They did . . . I've learned a lot during the last five years, Will, about men and women, too. I expect I know about as much as you know, now."

Will Payne smiled. "Then you know plenty." He drew his breath in deeply and expelled it, saying, "Have you heard about Rube?"

"Not too much. That's one reason I stopped here. Who was the man he killed, and why did he kill him?"

"I don't know why, Buck. But he killed Murch Kenton, the U. S. Indian agent out of Fort Gibson."

Buck said slowly, "About a year ago, Will, I got a letter from George telling me that Rube had married. Was George stretching a point, or did Rube really marry?"

"He married."

Buck looked at the storekeeper narrowly. "Then why would a fellow by name of Nate Partain try to sow doubts in my mind about that?"

Payne asked quickly. "You've met Nate Partain?"

Buck nodded, then told the storekeeper about the incident at Looney Springs.

"Nate wasn't steering you wrong about the Indian woman," Payne said. "Rube never married her. He couldn't. He wasn't legally free from his first wife, a woman named Lucy Paxton. Rube married her at Fort Smith and brought her to the hills and cleared a farm on Little Lee's Creek. I guess Lucy couldn't stand the isolation. She ran off with a cowhand that John Garland brought here from Texas."

"She never came back?"

"No. Rube didn't seem to care much, though. He has always been close-mouthed about his business, however, except when he took those arrogant, trouble-hunting spells. You know how like a full-blood Indian Rube has always been. He took Minnie Youngbird home with him from a summer picnic at the mouth of Polecat Creek one day, and he kept her. She was living with him when he killed Murch Kenton." Will Payne paused, his face tightening. "Rube's in bad trouble, Buck. Have you heard anything about this new Fort Smith Federal Court?"

"I heard some talk at Hare's Livery," Buck answered. "About a Judge Parker trying to clean up Indian Territory."

Payne said grimly, "He's a hanging judge, Buck, and once he gives a man that sentence nobody has a chance for appeal. Judge Parker has complete and final jurisdiction, as far as the white man's law is concerned, over all the Indian Nations."

Buck straightened, conscious of a cold surge of premonition. "You think Rube will hang?"

"I don't see how he'll miss it."

There was a hard core of finality in Will Payne's voice. Buck had the strange feeling that the walls of the store were pressing in on him. He shook that feeling and a thought came to him. "I met a Mrs. Garland at Looney Springs," he said. "She said she was taking Minnie and Sally Youngbird to see Rube in the Fort Smith jail. I got the idea that maybe

she had hired Nate Partain to sort of protect them on the trip. Who is she?"

"She's John Garland's widow. John died suddenly about two weeks ago. Stroke, I think, or something. Buck, have you heard anything about this cattle business in the Low Gap Hills?"

"Cattle business? This is all Indian land, Will."

"It's cattle country now. John Garland leased thousands of acres of timber land from Cherokees and brought a big herd up the Western Trail from Texas. I don't think local Indians realized what they'd done until Garland's hired hands started damming up the creeks and cutting and burning the timber. Trouble got bad, and Rube was right in the thick of it."

"Does that have anything to do with the trouble Rube's in now?"

Payne said evasively, "I can't make loose statements, Buck. I have my opinions, and if it becomes necessary I'll express them, but you know how it is with a man in business."

"Sure, Will. Thanks for telling me as much as you have."

"You're welcome," Payne said. "And another thing, Buck. See Brad King, the Deputy U.S. Marshal, as soon as you can. He arrested Rube after the shooting. Brad's square, and if he knows anything that will help you, I believe he'll tell you."

"Thanks again, Will."

Buck turned out of the store and saw his roan still waiting. He rubbed the horse's neck affectionately before he mounted and left Longtown. He sifted Will Payne's talk in his mind as he rode.

I did the wrong thing, a cowardly thing, when I left here, he thought. I acted foolish just because I was shaken up over Wynona. Things have changed here in my home country, and I've had no part in nor any knowledge of that changing. And I never can forget Wynona. I've wasted five years of my life. . . .

A thin crescent moon sent a muted brilliance through the young leaves of the red-oaks and caught liquid silver in the branches of the dew-wet cedars. The weight of self-condemnation rode him doggedly while the night wore on, so that he was barely conscious of the silence and the beauty and the spring-laden touch of the wind. He was that way until the roan suddenly nickered and slowed its pace, then

Buck straightened and looked ahead and saw the riderless horse standing at the junction of the road leading west toward New Hope.

Buck Caldeen realized suddenly that the thought of this had been hovering in his mind ever since he had watched her leave the store in Longtown. Wynona had waited for him.

He saw her rise from the moss-grown bank at the roadside and stand holding the reins of her horse as he halted.

"I had to wait for you, Buck," she said. "I hope you don't mind."

"No." He forced lightness into his answer. "I'd forgotten how lonesome this road can be at night. I'm glad to have company."

"Just any company, Buck?" she asked.

"I wouldn't say that, Wynona."

She laughed and flicked the ends of the reins against her riding skirt and stood looking up at him. Her face was a smooth oval in the dim moonlight, made more distinct by the dark loose flow of her hair. She was a mature and full-breasted woman and there had never been much subtlety about her.

"Buck," she said, "would you like to rest a minute while we talk?"

He sat his saddle and looked at her, feeling their isolation and knowing the danger of it.

"Let's talk while we ride," he said.

"All right." She mounted at once and reined up beside him. They turned right at the junction and kept on the Bellefonte Road. "Buck, you were glad to see me back there in the store," she said abruptly. "I felt it."

"Sure I was glad," Buck said. "What did you expect?"

"You hated me when you left here, Buck. I felt that, too, five years ago."

He said quietly, "I'd rather not drag that up."

"Oh, yes," she said. "Let's talk about everything, now that we have the chance. Nothing can hurt me any more, anyway, Buck. Did Mr. Payne tell you about Kimes?"

"He told me a few things."

"Has George ever written you anything about Kimes since you've been gone?"

"Nothing except that you two had married. I'm sorry to hear about Kimes being in trouble, Wynona."

She said with a touch of bitterness, "I believe you really

are, Buck, but that isn't the way I want it. You deserve to be happy because Kimes fouled up."

"Don't say that."

"It's true. You hated him and wanted me to stay away from him, and for good reasons. I know that now."

"That was all a long time ago, Wynona," Buck said. "I don't hate Kimes any more."

Her rejoinder was low and strained. "Then you don't care anything about me any more, do you, Buck? You've found some other woman."

He looked at her without answering, feeling a stark futility rising in him.

"All right, Buck," she said. "Don't answer that. I'm sorry I asked it. I know what you're thinking . . . that I'm a married woman now . . . that I've made my bed, like the old saying, and must sleep upon it."

Buck said uneasily, "Wynona, let's talk about something more pleasant."

She said eagerly, "All right. About your coming home, then. That is the most pleasant thing I can think of now. Buck, just the sight of you has made me happy, happier than I've been for a long time. But that brings us back to the same talk, doesn't it? You don't want that. You're afraid of talk about us, aren't you, Buck?"

"That could be true, Wynona."

"I'm not afraid of anything," she said. "Not any more." A sandy stretch in the road muffled the sound of their horses. He heard her slow intake of breath and watched her face tilt slightly. He sensed her decision to change the trend of the talk. "Buck," she said, "I'm sorry about what has hapepned to Rube. I suppose George wrote you about that?"

"If he did his letter never reached me. I found it out tonight, though."

She cut in swiftly, "You mean, Rube's trouble isn't what brought you back here?"

He said firmly, "I just decided to come home. Do you know why Rube killed that Indian agent?"

"I think I do."

Buck grasped the conviction in her answer and waited, not wishing to press her. It was going to be a relief, he thought, not to have to parry her thrusts or listen while she tried to reconcile something that was past reconciliation.

"I think it was because Murch Kenton was favoring John Garland's cattle business in the Low Gaps," she went on at

last. "Kenton was assigned to administer the affairs of a few uneducated and incompetent Cherokees, but he hated all Indians. He hated them because he had fought them—not Cherokees, but others—on the plains during his three years in the cavalry."

"How do you know that?"

"Kimes interviewed him once," she answered, "when Kenton first came here. That was before Kimes turned into a total wreck because he couldn't get dope regularly, before he started drinking mountain whiskey. Kimes was still trying to write his history then."

"Did Kenton make any open statements against the Cherokees?"

"No, he was pretty careful about that. He had his job to protect, of course. But he wouldn't stay with any of the Indians, not even for one night. He wouldn't even stay at Rube's house. He hung around the Garland Ranch, and associated mostly with Garland's foreman and Nate Partain. It showed most in his contemptuous attitude toward Indians, Buck."

"What's your opinion of this Nate Partain?" Buck asked.

"He's the spoiled son of another rich cattle family," Wynona answered. "The Partains haven't brought their cattle from Texas yet, but they built a fine house, almost a mansion, up at the edge of Sunnygile, and they're living here. Nate's a hard drinker and wastrel . . . and chaser of defenseless Indian women, some people say. I heard recently that he'd turned so bad his family cut off his money. He's working for John Garland's widow now, or rather he's staying on the ranch. I doubt if she could get much work out of him, even if she wanted to."

"Do you know anything about Mrs. Garland?"

Wynona laughed briefly. "Personally, I think she's a meddling do-gooder, Buck. That's a matter of opinion, of course. She may actually be helpful, in many ways. She distributes books and pamphlets among the Indians and talks of education being the thing that will solve their problems, but I think her reasons for doing that are selfish ones. Indians made a lot of trouble for John Garland, before he died. They tore down fences and pulled out a lot of dams Garland had constructed on the creeks, and even shot a few cattle that were destroying their cornfields. I think Mrs. Garland wants to keep on the good side of the Indians, hoping her cattle will thrive here without too much opposition."

"I can't see the Low Gaps as cattle country, Wynona," Buck said.

"I can't either, Buck. But the Indians are being made a servile people on the last land that will ever belong to them. They know it, and I think they'll fight."

Buck shifted in his saddle restlessly. "Things have certainly changed here in five years."

"Yes, they have, Buck." She looked at him steadily for a moment, then shrugged resignedly and faced ahead. "Things have changed in more ways than one."

She was impulsive, Buck Caldeen thought, and yet she was a strong-willed woman. Those two characteristics seldom went hand in hand. She was the kind who could impulsively say or do a thing and then not retract it or let it rest. She did not speak again, however, until they had traveled down the winding road from Eagle Mountain and were nearing the mouth of Polecat Creek.

"Buck," she said suddenly, "when will you go see Rube?"

"Probably late tomorrow, or tomorrow night. I want to talk with George, and maybe the deputy marshal who arrested Rube. I'd like to be able to take some encouragement when I visit Rube in jail."

"Would you mind if I go with you, Buck?"

The question startled him and he knew she sensed it. For a moment he didn't speak.

"I have a husband in the Fort Smith jail, you know," she said.

Buck weighed his answer carefully. "You know how loose talk gets started, Wynona. People would see us riding together, and they'd start remembering. You can't do that to Kimes."

She whipped her horse ahead of him and wheeled it, blocking his way. She said passionately, "I don't care what I do to Kimes!"

Buck said sharply, "Don't talk that way, Wynona! You don't mean it. You know you don't!"

"Don't I? You can say that, because you don't know the things he has done to me!"

"Then why do you want to see him?"

"I didn't say . . ." She paused and sat straight in her saddle, staring at him. Then she turned her face away, looking down and sideward in an attitude of listening, as if some message, some warning, had come to her out of the night.

Buck watched her, feeling a mounting tension during the

silence. From somewhere close at hand a night bird twittered sleepily, and Polecat Creek made a forlorn rushing, pushing its limpid waters into the swifter channel of Lee's.

"I thought we might take our buggy, Buck," she said finally. "I want to take a lot of things . . . some of Kimes' belongings, his writings, and other things."

"You can start early tomorrow, then," Buck Caldeen said.

"I can't possibly have everything together until late," she said impatiently. "Buck, you know some of the rough element in this country. You wouldn't want me to go alone!"

"I won't let you be a subject for gossip," Buck said doggedly. "I can't go with you, Wynona."

She waited a moment, then said eagerly, "Would you drive us, Buck, if I take along Minnie Youngbird's brother?"

Buck forced a laugh. "If you take him along, you wouldn't need me for protection."

"Oh, he's small, Buck," she said chidingly. "Just an Indian kid who chops sprouts sometimes for Dad. But with him along, no one would talk."

Buck said hesitantly, "All right, if you take the kid I'll drive you. If you show up without him, I won't."

"All right." She whipped her horse away toward the fork in the road and called softly over her shoulder, "Meet me about sundown tomorrow, Buck. Good night."

"Good night."

He watched her take the dip in the road and fade out of his vision, and presently heard the splashing of her horse on the Lee's Creek shoal. He listened while her horse's hoofbeats sent back their steady drumming from the road leading to Short. Then he nudged the roan and took the lefthand turn toward Low Gap.

It was two o'clock in the morning by his big silver watch when he entered the rail-fenced lane and presently stopped at the barnyard gate of home.

Three

He dismounted and stood a moment while memories of his youth came out of the shadowed buildings to meet him. The old house was dark, and its steeply pitched roof made the same solid outline against the night sky east of the barn. The smell of lilacs and honeysuckle in the front yard permeated the cool east wind, and the leaves of the tall cottonwood tree sent out a pleasant rustling that sounded like rain on the distant hills.

He looked into the barnlot and remembered that he had ridden his first colt there, clinging to the downy mane and laughing gleefully while his father held the rope. He had fired his first gun at the black-locust snubbing post near the watering trough, and had floated corncobs during the wet spells in the wallows made by the mules.

Buck opened the gate at last and led the roan through to the barn's hallway. For a moment he was a boy again, coming in at night from a box supper or a brush-arbor meeting, unsaddling and thinking of the fun he had left behind him, and vaguely dreading the harsh world of work in the fields tomorrow. His father would rouse him at four o'clock in the morning, rain or shine.

He caught his thoughts up short, remembering that his father was not here to rouse him now. Buck had been in Leadville two years ago when George had written him that their father had died.

Buck had wanted to come home then, but he hadn't, mostly because he had thought he couldn't bear to see Wynona Mapen. He had been trying desperately to get her out of his mind.

The strange thought came to him now that he was like a hound-chased rabbit circling a briar patch. He was right back where he had started from, and the baying of the

hounds had lessened, but there was still the faint unease in him that they were turning, that they had picked up his trail again and were coming to flush him out.

He shrugged that feeling aside and thought determinedly that he would never leave the hills of home again, no matter what happened. Whatever was destined to be inside a man would be in him, no matter how far he traveled.

He opened the door of the harness room and was turning to uncinch his saddle when a sibilant voice came to him out of the shadows.

"Rube! Is that you, Rube?"

Five years had coarsened George Caldeen's voice, but the uncertainty in it made it unmistakable. Buck looked beyond the wagon parked in the hallway and saw his younger brother standing like a dark-shrouded statue against the wall.

"This isn't Rube, George," Buck answered. "I'm your brother Buck."

"Lord God!"

George stayed frozen against the wall, but his exclamation held such a reaching intensity that Buck felt a sharp sensation almost akin to fear. He said uneasily, "George, is everything all right?"

George began to ease around the wagon, his breathing coming loud and fast. "I heard you ride in, Buck," he said. "I thought maybe they'd turned Rube loose."

Buck offered his hand as George drew close, but George didn't seem to see it. George kept staring into Buck's face. Buck reached up and gripped his brother's shoulder and asked quietly, "How are you, George? And how is Mom?"

"She's . . . she died about an hour ago, Buck."

A hot flash struck through Buck's middle and spread to consume his body, then faded, leaving him chilled. He said tonelessly, "Mom? . . . Dead?"

George said hoarsely, "I've been waiting out on the porch. I didn't know what to do. I . . . I didn't want to leave her. I covered her up and turned out the light . . ."

"What was wrong, George? How long has she been sick?"

"She got sick after Rube was put in jail. She wouldn't eat anything. I went to see Rube two days ago, and they . . . Buck, they're going to hang him!"

"Did you tell Mom that?"

George nodded, his face making a blur in the dimness against the intense blackness of his hair.

Buck steeled himself and finished unsaddling. He hung his rigging inside the harness room and came out and took George's arm. They went to the house that way, their footsteps making the only sound in the night's silence. Buck waited on the porch while George went in and lighted the candles.

Desolation struck him as he entered the front room and saw the candlelight flashing against the flintrock arch of the chimney. That chimney had always been the focal point of a close-gathered Caldeen family, winter or summer. The fireplace was a glowing Mecca in winter; in the summer it was a place for John Caldeen to knock ashes from his pipe, or to chew his home-grown tobacco and spit, on rainy nights when he couldn't sit out on the stoop of the porch.

The furnishings of the room were the same. The cane-bottomed chairs and the elm-bough rocker; the dark oak bureau with its marble top and high, square mirror; the Seth Thomas clock on the mantel and the pictures of bewhiskered and crinoline-gowned ancestors on the wall. John Caldeen's Mexican War rifle still rested on the yellowed hickory forks above the kitchen doorway, and above the gun was the painting of three storm-startled horses.

George stood at the bedroom doorway, waiting for Buck to pass. Buck had forgotten to remove his hat, but now he did so, and the candlelight was bright and revealing against his high-cheeked face. The shape under the covers of the bed had a pathetic frailty that intensified his dread as he halted. He stooped slightly and lifted the patchwork quilt and straightened and stood looking down into her face.

Five years would have aged and changed his mother, Buck thought, but now the repose of death had settled upon her and made her a withdrawn spirit. A sorrow too deep for tears was upon him, but his memories of her were far stronger than any impact her dead face could make.

"Leave the candle burning, George," he said, and replaced the cover and went into the front room and sat down in one of the cane-bottomed chairs.

The clock on the mantel struck twice, clear and distinct like a close bell chiming. George came in and took a chair. Buck had the feeling that his brother's eyes had never left him for one instant after he had entered the house. He turned to look at George and saw the same intensity, the unease and frustration in his face that had been there since

his childhood. George was nineteen and full-grown now, but the uncertainty had never left him.

"Did you get my letter?" George said. "The one about Rube?"

"No," Buck answered. "I always had my mail forwarded, but I guess I left too soon."

"When are you going back?"

"I won't go back, George. I'm home to stay."

George leaned forward, his eyes bright, restless. "You'll go back," he said. "You won't stay here. Rube told me once you'd never come back to stay."

"Rube was wrong." Questions were crowding Buck's mind, yet he sensed George's distrust of him and hardly knew how to ask them. "Why didn't any neighbors come in, George? Do people get deathly sick here now and no one ever visit them?"

George said flatly, "We didn't want anybody to come."

"Why?"

George got up and faced the fireplace, turning his back to Buck. "Nobody cares anything about the Caldeens now," he said bleakly. "You would know about that, if you hadn't stayed away so long!"

Buck stood also, aware of mounting impatience. "If you've underestimated the value of friends, George, you've made a bad mistake. Did you tell any of the neighbors about Mom's condition?"

"Nobody except Rube and the Youngbird family cares," George said. "And Rube's in jail." He turned, his eyes desperate. "Do you think they'll let Rube out, so he can come to the funeral?"

Buck shook his head and laid a hand on George's shuolder. "Not if he's charged with murder. . . . George, I'm sorry I stayed away so long, but I'm here to side you now, and I don't figure what Rube did has outlawed the Caldeen family. You can't pull yourself into a shell like a terrapin and try to let the rest of the world go by. No one respects a man who doesn't take part in things."

George said hotly, "That was what Rube was trying to do, and look what it got him! A bunch of these incompetent Cherokees signed away grazing rights to their land. They didn't know what they were getting into. They didn't know this country would be overrun with Texas cattle. Rube was trying to pull them out of their trouble . . . and now he's up to hang!"

"We'll tackle Rube's trouble later, George," Buck said.

"Right now we've got to think of Mom. You get on a fast horse and go tell the Youngbirds and the Mapens. Some woman needs to be here. I'll feed my horse while you're gone, then I'll go back to Longtown and have Will Payne make arrangements for the funeral."

"I don't want to ask for help," George said reluctantly. "I guess Wynona would come—she's always been friendly, or tried to, but Mom never wanted her around here, after the way she threw you over."

"Start riding," Buck said curtly. "And don't be backward about asking for help. Folks will be glad to come."

He watched George turn out through the doorway, then followed as far as the barn. George got a rope and headed out to the pasture for his horse. Buck fed and watered the roan, and stood a while under the hallway watching George bring a tall black horse in and saddle quickly and ride out through the lane. Buck went back to the house then and made coffee and sat in front of the fireplace drinking it and waiting.

An hour later he heard the sound of approaching horses. He went to the door and saw three riders dismounting at the barnlot gate. One of them was George. George took the three horses into the lot while Wynona and an aged Indian man came on to the house.

Buck went to the edge of the porch and waited while Wynona hurried through the gate and up the walk.

"Mr. Youngbird came, Buck," she said, and gestured to the Indian man. She caught Buck's hand and squeezed it reassuringly and didn't say anything else. She went on into the house.

"I'm Kick Youngbird," the Indian man said in good English. His face was a dark olive wedge under a stiff black hat. "You're Buck. I've heard Rube talk of you."

They shook hands and the Indian sat down on the edge of the porch.

Buck waited until George returned from the pasture, then he went to the barn and saddled the roan. Weariness was seeping into his marrow, but he knew there would be no sleep for him tonight. He mounted and sent the roan at a steady pace out onto the road to Longtown. It was broad daylight when he returned.

Will Payne had promised to have the grave dug in the Bellefonte cemetery. The storekeeper, always a good carpenter, had said he would make the coffin himself and that

his wife Sara would pad and line it with drygoods and lace from the store.

Wynona had breakfast and fresh coffee waiting. Buck ate, and then Wynona warmed water for him to shave. He took his black serge suit from his warbag and had her press it. He was dressed neatly when others began to arrive.

He stood with George at the gate and met them. Brink Stoneman brought his wife and two young boys from his farm in Sally Bull Hollow. Indians on horseback followed the buggy in single file. They tied up along the fence and around the edge of the clearing, then squatted down outside the yard and talked quietly in the Cherokee tongue. Stoneman's wife and boys went silently into the house, the children wide-eyed and breathless and ill at ease in clean, freshly starched clothing. Brink Stoneman sat with Kick Youngbird on the porch.

A lone horsebacker entered the lane and came on at a steady jogtrot, his face set straight ahead.

"That's Brad King," Stoneman said. "The Deputy U.S. Marshal."

King was a long, loose man, but his square-shouldered stance in the saddle gave him a look of competence. It was a credit to him, Buck thought, that he wasn't wearing his gun today on the outside. The weapon made a barely noticeable bulge under his close-buttoned black frock coat.

The marshal dismounted at the barnlot gate and opened the gate and led his horse in to the trough for water. There was no reluctance about him. He seemed perfectly at ease and at home. Buck watched George's face and saw the resentment building there, but he was not aware of the same reaction. The marshal had made a long ride under the hot sun, and Buck could respect any man who thought of the welfare of his horse.

King finished watering his horse and led it outside again and tied it in the shade of an elm. He took off his wide-brimmed hat and slapped the dust from it and came on toward the house.

"Howdy, George," he said as he stopped at the gate. Then his attention focused upon Buck. "Is this your brother?"

George nodded, and King offered his hand to Buck. There was a firm, solid warmth to his handclasp that brought Buck's instant trust.

"I'm sorry about your mother passing away, boys," King said.

"I'm glad you came, Marshal," Buck said. "I'd like to talk with you, after the funeral."

King nodded. "Will Payne said you would." He rested an elbow on the gate post and stood picking his teeth with a sharpened match.

Horsemen appeared in the rail-fenced lane, riding in a compact group. There were six of them, led by a close-built man on a high-headed buckskin.

"Kern Little," Brad King said. "Mrs. Garland's riders. Good of them to come."

Buck watched George stiffen and saw his eyes get dangerous and narrow. Buck shook his head warningly, and sensed that his warning had not been lost upon King. The riders came on and halted, the rigging on their horses glinting with polished brass. The Indians outside the yard stood up in unison, facing the riders stoically. Kern Little dismounted and walked steadily to the gate. He nodded to the marshal and George as he stopped, then his glance riveted on Buck Caldeen.

"I don't believe I've met you," he said. He thrust his hand out. "I'm Kern Little."

"Buck Caldeen. I'm glad to meet you, Kern." Buck shook hands with him.

"We haven't got long to stay, Buck," Kern Little said. "But we thought we'd come by and pay our respects. Mrs. Garland would have come too, I'm sure, but she's away on a trip."

"Thanks."

"If there's anything I can do," Little said, "I can send the boys on and stay here."

"No. Everything's being taken care of. Thanks anyway," Buck answered.

Little nodded, then turned and went back past the standing Indians and mounted his horse. At that moment Will Payne drove a light spring wagon into the head of the lane, hauling the coffin. His wife sat on the seat beside him. Kern Little and the other Texans rode out and met the wagon and passed on, their heads bared respectfully. Payne drew the wagon up at the gate and got down to assist his wife. Sara spoke to Buck and George softly and went on inside the house.

"Preacher O'Brien is visiting a sick woman over on Big Skin," Will Payne told Buck. "He said he would be at Bellefonte church in time to conduct the services." Payne turned and faced the group of Indians and gestured to the coffin.

The Indians came forward at once and took the coffin out of the wagon and carried it inside.

Buck heard the choking sound George made and watched him stride away fast toward the barn. Silence shut down after his going, and through that silence Buck heard the far-off mourning of a dove. Buck followed George, seeing the fields beyond the barn swimming in his vision. There was a violent churning inside him and his boots felt heavy on his feet.

George was squatted down in the hallway of the barn, his shoulders heaving. Buck felt the old love for his younger brother come up like a tight, hurting thing inside him. He knelt and touched George's hand.

"Get your horse saddled, George," Buck said softly. "They'll soon be ready to go."

George got up slowly and took the coiled rope from its peg and went out to the pasture. Buck saddled the roan, and by the time George had returned and saddled up the procession was forming behind the wagon. Wynona sat on the springseat with Will Payne and Sara.

Buck and George rode on either side of the wagon to the graveyard at Bellefonte Church. Preacher O'Brien was waiting at the door of the church. Buck glanced at the white-covered pineboard coffin on the wagon, and then on to Brad King who was riding slightly behind the makeshift hearse, and suddenly Buck wanted this thing to be over.

It was over at two o'clock. People started scattering, going their various ways. Buck stood with George by their horses and watched Brad King approach.

"You wanted to talk to me, Buck," King said calmly.

"It's about Rube," Buck said promptly. "I want to know if you think there's any chance for acquittal."

"On what grounds?"

Buck said firmly, "Rube had a good reason, Marshal. You can bet your life on that."

"I have never heard that reason stated, Buck," King said. "Besides, there's never a good reason for committing murder."

"You think that's the way it was?"

"According to the only witness."

"And who is that witness?"

"Nate Partain. He was with Kenton when Rube shot Kenton down."

"Will the court believe Partain's story?"

"The court will have to. Rube doesn't deny the charge."

George Caldeen burst out stridently, "Murch Kenton needed killing! He was supposed to be helping the Indians! He was a dirty, conniving—"

Buck said sharply, "Hush, George."

Brad King looked at George steadily, his eyes filled with compassion. "I know how you look at it, George. I'm sorry about the whole thing. I've told you that, many times. But your brother Rube was too high-tempered, too quick on the trigger. It ruined him." The marshal's glance swept around to include Buck. "It could do the same to either of you. Don't let it. This is a friendly warning, boys, to both of you. Even if a man needs killing, you can't call him out in front of your guns nowadays. Judge Parker is stopping that."

King mounted and rode away, his coat shining black in the sunlight. Buck took a long breath and watched him go, then became aware of another close presence. He turned. Wynona was standing near him.

Her face was stilled and her eyes held a deep, tender awareness of him so distinct that the sight of her shocked him.

"You'll sleep tonight, won't you, Buck?" she said.

"No. I'll try to rest some this afternoon. Then I've got to go see Rube."

She nodded, then lifted her face quickly toward the sun. Her glance drew down slowly, meaningly, and rested for an instant on the rim of the western horizon.

Buck caught her meaning and turned from her and mounted. When he looked around, she was mounting her own horse which Kick Youngbird had led from the Caldeen homestead.

Buck stopped briefly and thanked Will Payne and Sara; then George reined up beside him and they took the road back home.

George turned in his saddle once, his face strained with worry. "It'll take money for a lawyer, Buck. What are we going to do about Rube?"

"You try not to worry, George. I'll know more about what course to take after I see Rube."

"I'd like to go with you, Buck."

Buck shook his head. "It would just let Rube know how much you're worried. You saw him two days ago, you said. He doesn't need so many visitors. I met Mrs. Garland, taking Minnie and Sally Youngbird to see him yesterday."

George said with a breath of relief, "So that's why they

didn't come to the funeral? I was worried about that, but I didn't want to ask old Kick."

"I found out about you and Sally, George."

George Caldeen flushed and turned to look off across the mountains.

Buck said quietly, "I don't want to meddle with your business, George, but if you love her, take her by a decent marriage."

"I intend to, Buck." George was silent a moment, then he went on sadly, "I wish you had married Wynona, Buck. Kimes Montague led her a dog's life. I met her over on the creek last week, and she said she was going to sell her two cows and the riding horse to Will Payne. She's leaving this country."

Wynona's last words in the store to Will Payne flicked across Buck's mind: "Our transaction is complete, Mr. Payne?" she had asked. Buck kept mulling that over and it was still in his mind when he and George reached home.

"Wake me up about an hour before sundown," Buck told George as they unsaddled. "Wynona wants to go see Kimes. She wants me to drive the buggy." He noticed the sudden alertness in George and said at once, "She's taking Kick Youngbird's son along."

George said steadily, "Maybe she shouldn't. Maybe you two ought to be alone. She loves you, Buck. She told me."

"When?" Buck said sharply.

"Every time I've ever seen her, since she found out how rotten Kimes is. She loved you, too, before that, but she never said it."

"Don't spread that kind of talk around here, George."

George took the reins of their horses without answering and led them away to the pasture. Buck went to the house and sought the bed he had slept on as a youngster. The weariness of long days of travel and a night totally without sleep overwhelmed his throbbing senses. He dropped off to sleep at once.

Three hours later, George roused him. An hour after that, refreshed from a swim in the creek and the fast walk to the mouth of Polecat, Buck stood at the forks in the road and waited for Wynona and Kick Youngbird's son.

The buggy appeared, but Kick Youngbird's son wasn't on it. Wynona was driving alone.

Four

SHE BROUGHT THE BUGGY ON AND HALTED, AND HALF-STOOD and moved to the left-hand portion of the seat.

"Am I late, Buck?" she asked, smiling and offering the lines toward him.

"No." His answering smile was forced. "Where's the Youngbird kid?"

He watched the smile leave her face and gauged the cool, alert attention in her direct glance. She had anticipated any protests he would make, he thought, and had prepared for them.

"Did you really think I'd bring him, Buck?" she asked lightly.

"You said you would. I don't see any reason why you should try to trick me."

A touch of the old buoyant spirit crossed her face. "Weren't you half afraid I *would* trick you, Buck?" she queried.

"Yes," he admitted reluctantly.

She said happily, "Then you must have decided to go, anyway. Climb up."

He watched her steadily, feeling the same frustration he had felt the night before.

"Wynona, I told you I wouldn't go unless we had company," he said.

She turned from him with a swift, impatient lift of her head and sat looking along the roadway. Her face was in profile, and a lingering flare of sunset light deepened the rush of color on her cheeks.

She said in a small voice, "Buck, I threw discretion to the winds just to have some time alone with you."

"Don't be foolish, Wynona."

He watched the pride come up in her, a visible thing; and when she turned to face him again he could see the pulse beating rapidly in her throat.

"That's all you can ever say to me, isn't it, Buck? Don't be foolish. You used to say the same thing five years ago."

He said firmly, "You know I'm doing the right thing."

"Are you?" Her voice was tight and strained. "There's a thing I think you should know, Buck. I'm taking my personal belongings. I don't intend to come back."

"You can't do that, Wynona. Think of your mother and father."

She said with a touch of scorn, "They didn't go to your mother's funeral. Didn't you notice that?"

He didn't answer.

"I've brought too much gossip down on their heads, Buck," she said. "Good, solid old Ward Mapen, and Emily, proud as she ever was with the wealth she had in Tennessee! They're ashamed to be seen in public. They think everything that has happened is my fault! They even think your brother Rube's trouble is somehow tied in with the trouble I've had with Kimes."

"Why?"

She said slowly, "Maybe it's because Kimes was seen a lot with Murch Kenton. I don't know. My parents don't have to have good reasons. I married Kimes, and they hate everything about him. Maybe they hate me, too." She stopped suddenly, then went on impatiently, "We can't stay here in the road, trying to talk things out. Are you coming, or not?"

He watched her hands tighten on the checklines and knew she would give him only a moment to make his decision. He stood looking at her, aware of the responsibility resting in him. Maybe he owed this much to her, he thought—to make one last effort to sustain her courage, to try to persuade her to face up to whatever dark thing that had happened to her life. She was bitter and determined. Perhaps, if he had long enough to talk to her, he could prevent her from doing something rash.

He climbed to the seat beside her and took the lines. She showed no visible sign of elation at what she might have thought was his weakening. She sat quietly, looking straight ahead.

He drove the buggy across Polecat Creek and on up the rise of the foothills. She didn't speak until they neared the intersection of the Briar Creek road.

"No one travels much by way of Briar Creek, Buck," she said. "We won't be seen, in case you're afraid of gossip."

His dark glance flicked sharply at her, but he didn't answer. He turned into the Briar Creek road at the foot of Eagle Mountain and they went past the graveyard at Bellefonte Church. His face tightened in the dusky darkness as he looked at the fresh mound of earth where his mother was buried. Neither of them spoke while full night gathered around them.

The road was a rough, shadowed lane between walls of towering red-oaks and thickets of pitch-black cedars. Occasionally they passed the small, forlorn shapes of Indian cabins set back in weed-grown clearings. Buck kept remembering the mound of earth in the graveyard, and could not shake off a feeling of acute depression. What a fleeting, elusive thing was life, he thought, and how easy it was to waste it. Suddenly he looked at Wynona and said the thing he hadn't intended to say.

"Wynona, why did you marry Kimes Montague?"

She answered at once, "Because you ran away."

"What did you expect me to do?" he demanded. "You were making a fool of me."

"I know that now, Buck," she said. "I didn't know it then. My willful ways, and your pride and jealousy, ruined us. A willful girl and a jealous boy can cause themselves a lot of misery."

"I had a right to be jealous," Buck Caldeen said.

"Yes," she admitted. "You knew I was playing with fire, but I was young and didn't know it. Maybe it's too late, Buck, but I want to try to make you understand. Kimes embodied everything I'd been torn away from in Tennessee during the War . . . security, education, gracious living . . . things sweet to remember after a few years in this frontier land."

She paused and sat looking into the timber, her hair making a soft blur against the night's crowding blackness. Buck waited, knowing she was searching for words.

"Kimes came from a land even richer in education and fine manners than the one I'd been taken away from," she said. "I know now that his parents had pampered him beyond all reason. They had a great dream that their son would

travel among the Indians, like Irving, and write about them. Kimes told me when he first came here that he wasn't going to limit his writings to clothing, customs, mannerisms. He was going to search souls, he said, and find impulses and motivations . . . Oh, it was all very intriguing, just listening to him! He had an uncanny insight into human nature. Nothing shocked him, no one deceived him, but I didn't know until later that he lacked the one thing that might have made him great. That thing was compassion. He knew, and sought out, all those weaknesses people try so hard to hide, and he didn't confine his efforts to the Indians, even the older ones who had known a fairly cultured life in Georgia before the Trail of Tears. He searched the whites and half-bloods, too, but instead of feeling compassion he developed a brutal cynicism. . . . I didn't know that he was using dope. He picked that up in St. Louis, I think, and brought plenty with him. I only knew that he was educated, mannerly, and my education had been cut off and I craved to know things. . . . You know what, Buck? I think, even young as I was, I had the hope in me that I could absorb some of the finer things of life from Kimes, so that I might hand it on to our children . . . yours and mine . . . after we were married. I never ceased to love you, and I secretly laughed at your jealousy. It made me know you loved me, too. You did love me then, didn't you, Buck?"

"You don't have to ask that, Wynona."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, a woman needs to know." She drew her breath in audibly. "Do you still love me, Buck?"

Her directness had often shocked him, but never in the strange way it did now. Her question seemed to hang fire in front of him, like something tangible and drawing, like a magnet pulling at his spirit. He straightened on the seat, holding his answer and suddenly feeling the barrier of Kimes Montague between them. Kimes was a dark and repulsive wall against which her voice finally struck and disintegrated.

He said coldly, "It's years too late for me to answer that."

"No," she said. "Not if you feel it, Buck. The world holds too little of love. You know it."

"It holds too much of deceit and treachery, too. I don't want to find those things in you. You've just told me you know Kimes' weaknesses. You can't wait until a man gets in jail, and then abandon him."

"Abandon him! I'd have killed him, if they hadn't jailed him when they did!"

Her sudden change from warmth to rapier-like tension held him silent. He stared into the darkness, knowing there were depths of passion in her that he had never sensed.

"It's one thing to know a man's weaknesses," she said. "It's something else to know when the soul goes out of him."

"Do you want to tell me about it, Wynona?"

"I thought I did," she answered. "Now I don't know."

He waited, sensing the gradual reversal in her feelings. The sudden hardness that had shown in her outburst against Kimes Montague was now like the cold flint of an arrow tip that had lanced across in front of him and had gone on into the aisles of the forest, into infinity.

"I wanted to talk to you, Buck," she said at last. "I wanted to tell you everything, but now it seems rather futile, unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless I know you still care."

He looked straight at her, suddenly on the verge of anger. "There's a thing about me you ought to understand," he said. "You should have known it when I left here. When I love a woman, I won't accept whatever portion she feels content to dole out to me just to keep me stringing along. A woman I want has to be mine, wholly. I'd never settle for anything less."

"You don't have to, Buck." She stirred on the seat beside him. "I'm not the kind of woman who can become a martyr, going on alone and wasting the powers God gave me. I want to live, to love and be loved. I waited a year for you to come back, but you didn't, and Kimes kept pressing me. . . . In less than a week, I knew marriage to him was a mistake. . . . It isn't hard at all to say this, Buck. I love you. I'll be yours, wholly, any time you want me."

She was near him, so close he could feel the warmth of her body through the folds of her long traveling skirt, and could sense her urgency like a sharp pain stabbing through him. He was barely conscious of hauling back on the lines of the horse.

He felt his heart's solid hammering and tried to quell it, knowing that he was engaging in the same emotions she felt and spoke of so frankly. But it was useless to tell himself that her talk was futile, that what it implied could never be. She was the culmination of a longing that had stayed with

him almost constantly throughout five long years. He dropped the lines and caught her shoulders, and when she came against him with lifted face his arms went on hungrily around her.

He kissed her with an almost savage abandon that was devoid of tenderness at first. There was still the tag-end of the galling thought in him that he had wasted five years. Then, because the feel of her was the same, he knew that she had never really belonged to Kimes Montague. Her thoughts had reached out to him as his thoughts had reached out to her, and now they were alone together and nothing else mattered.

He was holding her that way when the shrill cry of a night hawk shuddered through him. The sound stiffened him and drew him straight on the seat. He held her away while faces leaped into his mind out of the darkness . . . the faces of Kimes Montague and Nate Partain.

"Buck," she said urgently, "what's wrong?"

He didn't answer. He listened to the dwindling cry of the night hawk and thought how strange it was that he had misjudged the source of his hatred for Nate Partain. It had not been because Nate had reminded him of a bully at school years ago. The sound of the night hawk was like taunting laughter, and the answer lay in the memory of Nate Partain's laugh at the Looney Springs campfire. Nate's laugh had reminded Buck of the cynical laughter of Kimes Montague.

"Buck," Wynona whispered again, "what is it?"

He looked at her and was suddenly acutely aware of their immediate surroundings, of the stark walls of timber, the darkness, the isolation. They were alone in the dark forest near Briar Creek, and there were no habitations, not even Indian cabins, anywhere near them, and yet a cold weight of dread had driven his hunger for her from him. He thought bleakly that it was the Indian in him, the superstition, but something told him it was a thing far stronger than that.

Wynona had sensed the change in him. Her luminous eyes threw out an unspoken query that reached on beyond her repeated question, "Buck, what in the world is wrong?"

The checklines had fallen between Buck Caldeen's knees and lay laxly across the buggy's dashboard. He leaned forward and took them without answering. At that moment he heard the sound of hoofbeats and turning wheels on the slope of the hill beyond Briar Creek. Clear thought came to

him at once. He slapped the horse with the lines and turned from the road to the concealment of a cedar thicket.

"Two wagons coming," he said. "Or maybe a wagon and a buggy. We'll let them pass."

He listened while the approaching vehicles rumbled down the rocky incline beyond Briar Creek and slacked off with the cushion of rushing water. Soft light from the rising moon came through the fog above the crossing, revealing the buggy and the covered wagon. It was Mrs. Garland's party, Buck thought, returning from Fort Smith. He wondered why they hadn't taken the better road through Longtown.

He saw the tall, distinct shape of the widow on the seat of the buggy. She was driving, and she was riding alone. Behind her, on the wide seat of the covered wagon, Buck recognized Sally and Minnie Youngbird. The vehicles passed noisily and went on toward Bellefonte church house, leaving Buck wondering what had happened to Nate Partain.

Perhaps the widow had not wanted to be seen on the return trip without a man escort. She would be that kind of person, Buck Caldeen thought. He shoved his next thought from him resolutely, slightly shamed, but it kept recurring while he drove the buggy back to the road and forded Briar Creek. If something happened to Nate Partain, the man could not be a witness at Rube Caldeen's trial for murder. . . .

They had traveled almost a mile across the mountain before Wynona spoke.

"Things aren't just right between us, are they, Buck? I suppose we'll say good-bye at Fort Smith for good?"

He weighed his answer carefully. "You shouldn't leave your folks, Wynona. You can't run from anything. Whatever you think or feel will be in you, wherever you are. You should stay at home, at least until Kimes is out of jail."

She said coldly, "As far as I'm concerned, Kimes doesn't exist. I can easily free myself from him, legally . . . and nothing can change my mind about leaving home." She lifted a small shoe to the buggy's dash and her voice softened. "Something stopped you back there, Buck, and I'm glad, in a way, but I'll always wonder what."

He looked at her, thinking how strange it was that not until this moment had he given conscious thought to a warning his father had often pressed upon him years ago—"Don't touch another man's woman."

"Your husband's in jail," Buck answered at last. "You're

torn up, disillusioned. I'm not low enough to take advantage of a situation like this."

She laughed softly. "You know how to parry every advance I make, Buck. You must have met many women on your rounds out west." She looked at him intently, then said seriously when he didn't speak, "Forgive me, Buck. Maybe I've forgotten that there are some honorable men."

Her contrasting moods intensified the weight of despair that was slowly growing in him. Strain was making her unpredictable, and that was a dangerous thing. He didn't speak until they turned into the main Fort Smith–Longtown road.

"What will you do in Fort Smith, Wynona?"

She said evasively, "I have plans."

The hooves of the horse made a dull, muted clumping on stretches of wheel-cut sand. Buck drove faster on the downgrade toward Pleasant Grove church house, and on past Remy to the summit of Mayfield Mountain. The Arkansas River Valley was a gigantic void shimmering under the light of the climbing moon. Far south, in the Choctaw Nation, loomed the dark, solid bulk of Cavanal Mountain and the Winding Stairs beyond it. Far away and down was the thin line of the river and the fog-shrouded lights of Fort Smith.

"Will you take this horse and buggy back home for me?" Wynona asked.

"I guess so."

They traveled down from the uplands while the moon climbed toward the zenith. Low-lying ponds and bayous threw out a stultifying, windless heat. They struck the Albert Pike Road and turned sharply eastward, passing the darkened farmhouses between the edge of Grassy Lake and Moffett settlement. They pulled up at the ferry before midnight and the ferryman grudgingly took them across the river.

Buck tooled the buggy up the slope to Garrison Street and slowed it.

"Leave me at the Le Flore Hotel," Wynona said. "I'll give you money to put this rig up at a livery."

"You aren't going to see Kimes tonight?" Buck asked.

"I never said I would see him at all, Buck," she answered. "I just told you that I had a husband in the Fort Smith jail. Remember?"

"You said you were bringing some of his things."

"Yes. But I don't intend to see Kimes. I'll leave his things with the jailer tomorrow."

There was cold finality in her voice.

Buck halted in front of the hotel and jumped down and offered his hand to her. She came down lightly and stood opening her purse.

"I'll take care of the livery charges," Buck said curtly.

He helped her carry her luggage inside the hotel and waited under the sleepy-eyed stare of the night clerk while she signed the register. A porter appeared and took her luggage and nodded toward the stairway. Wynona turned to Buck and held out her hand.

"I hope you find Rube well," she said. "And thanks."

Buck took her hand and released it and watched her stand a moment looking at him: a calm, reserved woman, her self-sufficiency shutting him out. Whether it was a pose or not, he couldn't tell, but the sudden change in her held its impact and made him conscious again of the strange ways of women.

"Take care of yourself, Wynona," he said.

She smiled briefly. "Good-bye, Buck," she said, and turned and went up the staircase.

Buck waited until her footsteps faded out beyond the first landing. Then he glanced at the sleepy night clerk and turned and went outside.

Five

HE PAUSED AT THE EDGE OF THE WALK AND ROLLED A SMOKE, and stood a moment watching the fog rolling in from the river. It obscured the ferry wharf and the black smoke-stacks of steamboats, and hung like a pall over the old Commissary Building just south of Garrison Street. No sentry paced there now, and Buck wondered if the rumors he had heard were true, that the Fort Smith garrison was abandoned. Strange, he thought, that he had not asked about it. His own soldiering days, as time went by, weren't too far distant.

He looked eastward along the street and saw that traffic was at a standstill. Five riderless horses stood dejectedly in front of an all-night saloon, and a loaded freight wagon was drawn up like a glowering monster of commerce in the center of the muddy street. Some horse-loving hostler had evidently taken the horses to feed and shelter. The driver was passed out drunk on the seat.

Buck got on the buggy and drove down Garrison Street and up Texas Road to Hare's Livery. His father had always patronized this place. It was a rambling affair with a wide hallway and spacious stalls for teams. Buck had slept many nights here in the back of the wagon, and had roused as many mornings, thrilling to the smell of the place and the sound of crooning pigeons.

He left the horse and buggy in care of the hostler and checked in his gun and scabbard with old Jibo Fain at the office. He came out and started walking. It was ten minutes past midnight when he climbed the steps of the Fort Smith Federal Jail and went in.

The jailer was a heavy-jawed man, clean-shaven, sharp-eyed, alert. Beside him, lounging with a disarming indolence in a swivel chair, sat Brad King, the deputy marshal from Longtown.

Buck was surprised, and he showed it briefly. Brad King grinned.

"Well, Buck," King said blandly, "for a man who has traveled better than two thousand miles, you look 'fitten'."

"Thanks, Marshal," Buck answered. "What brings you here at this time of night—business?"

"Yeah." King stood up. "I've got to hire me a good deputy." He motioned to the jailer. "Meet Buck Caldeen, Frank. He's the man I've been telling you about. Buck, this is Frank Masters. He's been taking good care of your brother Rube."

Buck shook hands with the jailer. "I'd like to see Rube for a few minutes," he said.

The jailer nodded in a friendly way and reached to his desk for a ring of keys. He jiggled them absently and stood looking at the marshal. Brad King laid a hand on Buck's shoulder and said quietly, "This may come as a surprise to you, Buck, but if you'll take the job, I'd like to hire you. I've already talked to the U. S. Marshal."

Buck said mildly, "I wouldn't make a lawman, Brad."

King smiled. "I think you would."

Buck gave the marshal his cool attention, feeling King's personality drawing him the way it had drawn him before and after his mother's funeral. Buck had learned to take the measure of a man, quickly, and this marshal had a calm and arresting power that measured the whole span of manhood.

"I look at the thing this way," King went on. "You've traveled wide and learned solid judgment. Don't think that I don't know. Men come and go around Longtown, good and bad, but not many ride on before I know their history. I checked on you, partly through George, before I had to arrest your brother. You rode for the Matador Ranch in Texas. I learned through a Kansas marshal that you captured single-handed one of the roughest crews out of No Man's Land, and that without benefit of a badge. You ought to know Texas men, Buck, and that's one reason I'd like to have you. We have some Texans in the Low Gap hills now, and lots of people are scared of trouble. The Pins are riding again, and Cherokee officers don't seem to be able to control them. I'd

like to nip trouble in the bud before it starts, and I need a good man to side me."

Buck shook his head. "I'll remember this offer, though, Brad. Thanks for the confidence you have in me, anyway."

"You don't have to give me your answer now," King said. "Take your time about thinking it over. I'll be dropping around."

"All right."

"I told Rube about your mother," King said. "You won't be allowed much time to talk to him, so I thought I'd . . . well . . . make things easier."

"Thanks, Brad."

"You're welcome." King lifted a nonchalant hand to the jailer and left.

Masters reached to a rack on the wall and took down a sawed-off shotgun. He cradled the weapon in the crook of his arm and led the way, the ring of keys in his hand jingling softly in time with his unhurried footsteps. Buck followed, almost choking on a stifling, sickening smell. Masters unlocked the door to the corridor.

The stench of the place was appalling: a commingling odor of human refuse and sweating bodies, of pack-rats and tobacco smoke and disinfectant. Low-voiced talk came from the rows of small steel cells on either side, and the sound of snoring and tortured bodies turning and the scraping of restless feet. Masters halted at last and called pleasantly through the bars on his left, "You've got another visitor, Caldeen." Then, to Buck, the jailer said firmly, "Five minutes. Talk fast, and quiet." He left.

Buck saw Rube's hand thrusting through the bars toward him. He took it, and then looked up into Rube's dark, aquiline face. All the things they were reluctant to say to each other during that first moment were there, locked tightly in the pressure of their hands. Buck thought again that the Caldeens had always been a close family. Nothing about that had changed. It never would change, he thought, even though he had never fully understood Rube Caldeen.

Rube said with his habitual taciturn humor, "You look good, Buck, for a prodigal son. Trimmed down like a Yankee soldier."

Buck forced a smile. "I never gained back the weight I had scared off of me at Pea Ridge, Rube," he said. "I'll give the Yankees that kind of credit, but they didn't convert me. How are you?"

"Inactive."

"We're going to try to change that, Rube."

"Judge Parker's going to save you all that trouble," Rube said. "He'll have me dancing soon—right down at the end of a rope."

"Rube, who's your lawyer?"

"Mine? Why saddle some jack-leg shyster with my kind of trouble?"

"I want some information, Rube," Buck said. "What kind of plea are you going to make? Why did you kill Murch Kenton?"

"Because he needed killing. Used to, they didn't call that murder."

"Why did you, Rube?" Buck pressed. He looked at his brother intently, becoming leary of Rube's flippant talk. It wasn't like him.

Rube turned away swiftly, then turned back. His long, dark hands gripped the bars. "I won't answer any questions, Buck," he said grimly. "I killed Kenton, and I'll hang for it, and that's all there is to it. I'm glad to see you. You know that. But I'm not talking, to you or anybody else."

"But, Rube, I want to help you. George . . . he's taking this hard. . . ."

"Yeah," Rube said. "Yeah . . . but he'll live over this, just like he'll live over Ma passing away. You go stay with him."

Buck detected the break in Rube's voice when he mentioned their mother, and knew instantly that his brother's abandoned talk was an effort to hide his sorrow. Buck waited a moment before he spoke again.

"You've got to answer my questions, Rube. Why did you kill Murch Kenton? And why won't you get a lawyer?"

"All a lawyer can do is postpone my trial . . . or maybe try to get me to plead temporary insanity." He expelled his breath audibly, as though trying to release pent-up feelings. His voice held a low-strung power. "The only thing I want you to do, Buck, is go stay with George. Help him get that farm on its feet, and see that he marries Sally Youngbird. You and me, we knew the Caldeen family when they amounted to something, but one way and another we messed up our lives. George never had a chance for solid living. The War tore that out from under the Caldeens. You got moon-eyed over a high-headed wench and just hightailed out of the country. You won't ever feel strong about things in the Cherokee Nation again, but George does, because I've preached it to him. We've

got to let George raise a family and know a good life, Buck. You've got to help him fight to keep that farm, if he has to. You've got to side him. I can't, not any more."

"Rube, did you kill that Indian agent because he was partial to Low Gap cattlemen?"

"No. I tried to keep cattlemen out, all right, tried to stop the waste of timber. But that isn't the reason I killed Kenton. Nobody will ever know that reason, except me. Now don't ask any more questions."

"Did you know Kenton during the War?" Buck asked.

Rube didn't answer. He stared at Buck stonily through the bars.

Footsteps in the corridor signaled the jailer's return. Rube turned away, his big form vanishing in the shadowy cell. The jailer stopped and said curtly, "Time's up, men."

With a cold frustration, Buck stood for a moment looking into the dimness of the cell. "I'm going to see a lawyer, Rube," he said, but Rube didn't answer. Buck turned and followed Masters back to the jailer's quarters and asked as they reached the desk, "Who is the best lawyer in this town?"

Masters racked the sawed-off shotgun and pitched the ring of keys on the desk. "I don't believe in keeping a doomed man's family in doubt," he said emphatically. "No lawyer can help your brother."

Buck's dark eyes caught him in an icy trap. "What makes you say that, fellow?"

Masters shrugged. "Lawyers have been here to see Rube. He won't try to establish grounds for defense. He won't talk."

Buck said relentlessly, "I want to hire the best lawyer in this town!"

"Well," Masters said resignedly, "Kohl Bishop's a good one . . . or he was before Judge Parker's time. No lawyer gets many acquittals now. They can't appeal a death sentence, and that kind of shortens their strings."

Buck's frustration and concern for Rube was mounting to a fever pitch. He suppressed it visibly and said with all the courtesy he could muster, "Thanks, Masters." Then he turned and went outside.

Night wind touched his face, clean and cooling after the stench of the jail's interior. The fog had lifted, and the high moon threw its brilliance against the masonry of the jailyard wall. The entrance of the jail, which on Buck's arrival had merely been a pale blob of light in the fog, was now clearly distinct in the moonlight. He looked about him with some

surprise. Jibo Fain, who had given him directions to the building, had failed to mention that the jail was established in a portion of the abandoned fort. Buck looked at the garrison wall and at the dark, hulking shapes of the empty buildings north of the Coke Hill district and felt the same kind of oppression he had felt at the close of the Civil War.

This had once been a thriving army post on the edge of a far-flung and wild frontier. Chiefs of the Indian clans had met in council here, and the hard-packed earth of the parade ground had felt the impact of the boots of Rebel and Yankee soldiers through the alternating fortunes of war. Life had pulsed here; a time had come and gone; and now a hangman's gibbet stood menacingly in the moonlight inside the old garrison wall.

Rube Caldeen, ex-Confederate soldier, ex-guerrilla, lover of the Cherokee Nation, might hang on that gibbet. . . . Buck forced the thought from him as he headed back for the livery.

He went by way of Garrison Street, remembering that he was unarmed, and unwilling to take a darkened course across the side streets. He neared the all-night saloon and decided on a short drink before renting a bedroll at the livery.

The saloon was a roistering replica of other drinking establishments Buck Caldeen had entered during five years of roaming the West. Buck, always a light drinker, had never patronized any of them to a great extent. He found a precarious opening at the bar and ordered whiskey. He sipped it while the sounds of the place, which had seemed muted from the street, washed blatantly around him. The five horses tied outside, he thought, made a deceptive barometer by which to gauge this saloon's volume of business. It was chockfull of people, and more kept coming through a side door leading to Fourth Street.

Buck stiffened suddenly, then caught himself and downed the rest of his drink with a show of outward calm. A man had sidled against him, weaving drunkenly. Through the back-bar mirror Buck could see him without turning to face him. The man was Nate Partain.

Partain was drunk, and he showed it with callous abandon. His eyes were wild and wide, probing the walls in an effort to focus. It was evident that to him the room had become a gigantic, spinning void. His tie was askew, his shirt wrinkled and discolored with spilled beer and particles of food.

"By God," Nate yelled at the bartender, "I want my gun!"

The bartender waved him away contemptuously. "Come back in the morning, Partain. You'll get it after you're sober."

"Like hell I will!" Nate ground his teeth when the bartender wheeled away from him. Then he lowered his head, smiling with a drunk man's vague cunning. When the bartender passed to serve a customer, Partain reached out erratically and managed to grab his arm. The bartender jerked free, but Partain's voice shrilled out at him, "Who said I killed a man, by God! Who said it?"

A man at the end of the bar said harshly, "You said it yourself, mister. You said you killed a man over in the Indian Nations. Maybe you better shut your mouth."

Silence spread in the room and became all-inclusive. Nate Partain got very still and stood gripping the edge of the bar like someone who had inadvertently dozed and had roused suddenly and become conscious of other people watching him. The bartender was the first to speak.

"Nate's a bag of wind and bluster, Joe," he said to the man at the end of the bar.

Joe said flatly, "Maybe so, but he told it damned convincing!"

Buck watched Nate through the mirror, half expecting a wild outburst from him. It didn't come. Nate's eyes cut down and sideward and his head dropped. He sagged slowly across the bar, overturning empty glasses and rolling them off to the floor. His hat came off and his face pressed gently against the bar top, turning slightly. His eyes closed, and from his open mouth came the sound of snoring.

"Good time to play 'possum," Joe said cynically. "Want me to throw him out in the gutter, Pete?"

The bartender said wearily, "He paid for a room upstairs. I'll get the swamper to take him."

Buck approached the man called Joe and asked quietly, "How did Partain tell it, Joe?"

Joe's face got wary. He glanced quickly at the slumped form of Partain and wheeled away. "You ask him, mister," he flung back over his shoulder.

There was one thought in Buck Caldeen that night while he prepared for sleep in the livery. Nate had killed a man once. When?

Six

BUCK CALDEEN ROUSED NEXT MORNING WITH A FEELING OF lassitude and a momentary sense that time had moved sharply backward. He heard the pigeons crooning in the musty loft and the sounds of horses snorting and stamping. He smelled the hay and the corn shucks, the dry manure; and the aroma of boiling coffee drifted out from Jibo Fain's ramshackle livery office. Feed buckets rattled and banged as the hostler went about his chores, and outside in the livery corral a man was talking soothingly to some boogered horse. For an instant Buck was back in his childhood days, thinking of a good breakfast in the Greek's restaurant on Garrison Street and the long hours he would spend with his father in town.

He remembered Rube's trouble with a vague reluctance, and then memories slid from him and he got up to face the business at hand. He dressed and buckled on his gun, took the bedroll back to the office, and went out and on into the main part of town.

He ate breakfast unhurriedly, marking time, and later entered a barber shop and got a shave. He came out and walked west along Garrison, looking for Kohl Bishop's sign. He found the lawyer's office open. Bishop was in.

Bishop was a thin-faced man with a long goatee, gray-haired and slightly balding. He greeted Buck with a minimum of interest and motioned to a chair.

Buck stated his business without preliminaries, and then he asked the price.

Bishop leaned back in his office chair and tapped the top of his desk meditatively with a blunt pencil. "Rube Caldeen,"

he said. "Yes . . . yes, I know of his case. I offered him my services. When did he change his mind about hiring a lawyer?"

"He hasn't changed his mind."

"Hmm." The pencil stopped tapping. "You know, of course, that the court may appoint an attorney, whether he wants one or not, in his case. He admits killing the man, but insists that a justifiable killing isn't murder. It is a decidedly mixed-up thing. He says the man needed killing, but he refuses to say why. Do you know why?"

"No."

Kohl Bishop smiled condescendingly. "You don't by any means expect a lawyer to grab some reasons out of thin air?"

Buck rose impatiently. "My legal knowledge is limited, I'll admit," he said. "But if we *can* find the reason—a good reason —don't you think Rube has a chance?"

Bishop pulled at his long goatee and said reflectively, "You asked my price, and I can tell you frankly that it will cost you plenty if I have to hire men to scour the hills in search of your brother's motive."

Buck said quietly, "How much will it cost me if I do the searching for a motive? I believe I can do it as well as anybody else."

"I shall require a five-hundred-dollar retainer," Kohl Bishop said.

"Does that have to be cash?"

Bishop said emphatically, "Cash."

Buck turned to the door and pulled his hat down square across his forehead. He said over his shoulder, "I don't have that much money now, but I'll get it. You plan on taking the case. I'll be back."

The lawyer showed his first sign of eagerness. "When?"

Buck paused. "It wouldn't matter when, would it, just so I pay you? I might be back in a few minutes. It may take hours, or a few days."

"Well . . . yes . . . even a few days would be all right."

"Thanks," Buck said, and went outside.

Traffic on the street had thickened with the advancing morning. It was Saturday, and the town would be crowded today. Hitching rails were already lined from Second Street to the corner of Fifth and Garrison. Farm women moved with feigned decorum along the walks, covertly watching their gangling husbands eyeing the fronts of the many saloons. Cherokees, Choctaws, and a few Creek Indians loitered under the awnings, looking at the crowds with stoical apathy. The

drunken freighter, half sober now and sick and sorry, was hitching a big span of horses to the wagon in the center of the street.

Irrelevantly, Buck started thinking of Nate Partain, remembering Partain's rash and strident talk. It might be a thing he should tell Brad King about, Buck thought; and with that thought he forced Nate from his mind.

He neared the bank and paused, wondering whether he should borrow the money there or at Will Payne's store in Longtown. He remembered that Indians had got in deep to Will during and after the War, especially the Confederate sympathizers. Many of those Indians had never paid out, and bad times had probably overloaded Will with long-range credit. The Confederate Government had promised to pay tribal annuities to the Indians, but that money had seldom arrived. Buck decided to try the bank. His father had borrowed money there often years ago.

A few minutes later, after filling out papers with a clerk, Buck was seated across a desk from a graying man with crinkly sideburns and mild brown eyes behind horn-rimmed spectacles. A neat sign on the man's desk stated that this was Mr. Branson.

Mr. Branson looked at the papers the clerk had given him and said at once, "Mr. Caldeen, I'm sorry to inform you that your family's credit status is sadly impaired."

Buck looked at the banker sharply. "Why?"

"A large foreclosure, two years ago," Mr. Branson said. "Your father borrowed money for new farm equipment and supplies to make a crop. I understand that sickness ruined him, but nevertheless, without solid security, you'll find it impossible to borrow money here, even the three hundred dollars you want."

"I can put up a good horse and rigging," Buck said.

"I'm sorry."

"The saddle is worth two hundred."

"I'm sorry," Mr. Branson repeated, and looked at a waiting customer. Obviously, he wanted the interview closed. Buck got up and left him.

He walked slowly along the street, thinking sadly how time passed and things changed, and how a drifting man could be the last to discover that changing. There had been a time when the word of a Caldeen was as good as a bond. Buck thought again how futile it was for a man to spend years in aimless wandering, and with that thought came memories of Wynona.

She had seldom been far from his mind since the day when he had first met her, and often, lying in his soogans in the open at night, he had thought how strange that was. Strange that one woman, out of all the women he had met and associated with, should occupy his mind and heart for so long a time. He looked toward the front of the Le Flore Hotel, remembering her reserve when they had parted in the lobby. What would she do? he wondered. What would become of her?

The insistent voice of a carnival barker on the open lot east of Fourth Street drew Buck's attention. He went that way, watching the barker's comical antics, and seeing the multi-colored wheel with the darts sticking in it at the side of the yellow wagon. Young Indians crowded around the wheel, eager for a game of chance.

Gambling! The thought hit Buck's mind with a solid impact and brought instant decision. He had two hundred dollars of the five hundred he needed, and he had always been a fair hand at poker. Till Petrie, an old boyhood friend, had been running a gambling house across the river at Moffett for years. Till would accommodate Buck Caldeen with a fast and fair game of stud, and fast and fair was the way Buck wanted it now.

His long stride took him swiftly through the crowd and on down the slope of the street to the river. He stood on the wharf with a mounting impatience while the ferry came in and disgorged its passengers and took on others for the trip to the Cherokee Nation side.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning when Buck left the ferry on the western shore and turned out on the curving road leading through Moffett. Till Petrie's place stood close to the river, and it had once been a cheap café catering to the trade of riverboat tramps and harddrinking Negroes and Indians. It was still a place where a man could find anything he wanted, from whiskey to women, but it was a huge, newly-painted building now with a graveled parkway and a prosperous, respectable front.

Business would be at a standstill this time of day, Buck knew. Only one richly-groomed team of horses stood hitched to a phaeton parked in front. Buck went through the wide-paneled door and was at once in the barroom. The barroom was devoid of customers. The bartender, wearing a spotless white shirt and black bow tie, stood looking at Buck impersonally.

"Is Till Petrie in?" Buck asked, pausing.

"He just came in. He's busy."

"Any games going now?"

The bartender asked coldly, "Who are you, friend?"

"Buck Caldeen. I'm an old friend of Till's."

The bartender's attitude changed at once. "Caldeen? Sure, I've heard Till speak of you. Wait here."

He circled the bar and approached a small door at the rear of this room. He stopped and knocked three times and stood there waiting. A peep-slot in the door moved soundlessly and Buck could dimly see two eyes and a portion of forehead.

"Buck Caldeen is here, Till," the bartender said. "He wants to see you, if you aren't too busy."

The peep-slot closed and the small door opened immediately.

"Howdy, Till," Buck Caldeen said, and walked forward.

Till Petrie's suave, dark face went mobile, revealing pearly teeth in a sudden smile. He was tall and supple and almost startlingly good-looking, with sloe-black eyes and a straight nose and wide, strangely blue-tinged lips under a pencil line of mustache. He stopped and threw his hand out loosely, nonchalantly, but when his grip met Buck's it was shockingly strong and firm.

"Speak of the devil!" he said feelingly. "I've just been talking about you!"

"You're looking good, Till," Buck said.

Till released Buck's hand and took a backward step and stood looking Buck over. His black eyes held a long moment on the smooth walnut handle of Buck's gun.

"You'll do," Till said. "What are you looking for? Whiskey, or women?"

"Neither, Till," Buck answered. "I'm—"

"Maybe one woman, then?" Till cut in.

"No. I'm looking for a game of stud poker."

Till laughed and threw an arm across Buck's shoulders. "Then you haven't come for a friendly visit. Stud poker means that a man means business. Right?"

Buck nodded. "I need to win some money . . . fast."

Till Petrie laughed again. "Who doesn't?"

The gambler led Buck through the small doorway and along a narrow corridor that ended at a curtained archway. Till parted the curtains and stopped, throwing a hand out dramatically.

Buck Caldeen stopped slightly to the side and behind the gambler, his eyes sweeping halfway across the room. Some sixth sense of premonition had struck him the instant the curtains had parted, but it had nothing at all to do with fear. He knew what it was, quite suddenly. Sitting at a table in the center of the room, looking toward him, was Wynona.

Seven

HER SURPRISE WAS AS GREAT AS HIS OWN, BUT SHE WAS making a quick effort to conceal it as she pushed her chair away from the table and stood up.

Till said expansively, "Wynona, here's that man we were just talking about. He's looking for a game of stud poker."

Buck followed the gambler on, fighting for an easy manner. When they stopped in front of Wynona, he saw that she had totally regained her poise.

"Well, Buck," she said, smiling. "I didn't know gambling was one of your vices."

Buck smiled in return and said banteringly to the gambler, "Hear that, Till? She calls gambling a vice."

"Gambling's an institution," Till Petrie said. "You'll have to remember that, Wynona, if you're going to work for me."

A strained silence fell between them.

"Well, what the devil!" Till said. "Why don't you two shake hands?"

Wynona laughed softly. "You talked so fast I didn't have a chance to tell you, Till," she said. "Buck and I have met since he came home. He brought me to town last night."

"Oh," Till murmured. His black glance fastened upon Buck, slowly, measuringly dropping down to Buck's gun and up again, but his gambler's face hid anything he might have felt. "Wynona, will you break out a new deck of cards for us?" he asked. "There in the center cabinet."

She smiled and turned away, and the gambler watched her. Intently, Buck watched the gambler's face. Till's eyes held a cool appraisal of her, and a subtle, waiting curiosity that

brought alive an old flame akin to jealousy in Buck Caldeen.

Till motioned for Buck to sit down at a table. Buck did so, watching the gambler take the chair opposite him.

"Remember how we used to play hull-gull with grains of corn, Buck?" Till queried.

"Sure. We used to beat each other about five times out of ten."

Till laughed and watched Wynona bringing the deck of cards. Buck didn't lift his eyes as she stopped and broke the cards out, but he watched her hands. He was surprised at her deftness, but then he thought that she had always known how to do things. Her hands were strong and sun-browned, but they would change to a soft, supple whiteness in the dimness of this room. She would learn things fast, he thought, too fast and too many things. The thought brought a faint inward sickness.

"What kind of limit, Buck?" Till asked briefly.

"I'll be frank, Till," Buck answered. "I've got two hundred. I want to try to run it up to five."

Till held the cards without dealing. "I'm still your friend, Buck," he said. "How bad do you need five hundred?"

"Bad enough," Buck answered. "But I didn't come here to play on our friendship. I'll quit if you start sloughing off."

"I'm a gambler," Till said sharply. "I wouldn't deliberately let my own brother beat me. You'd be welcome to five hundred though. I'll loan it."

"Deal the cards," Buck said.

Wynona turned away abruptly, and Buck watched her while Till riffled the cards and set the deck down and shoved two hundred dollars' worth of chips across to his side of the table. Wynona was looking around at the furnishings of the room, and at the pictures on the wall. Not once did she look toward their table, at least before the game got under way, and after that Buck tried to shut her from his mind.

But the shock of suddenly seeing her in this lavish gambling hall was still in him, intensifying with the passing moments as the implications built and swarmed in his mind. "I have plans," she had said evasively the night before. What were her plans? Had Till Petrie talked to her before? Would she throw body and soul away in this river-front hangout for wealthy Fort Smith gamblers and ruthless adventurers? The thought was intolerable, sickening. It showed on him, mounting as the game advanced, and running out in uncontrollable tremors along his hands.

He won the first pot on a pair of queens, but lost heavily on the next two hands, opening the first of those go-rounds with twenty-five dollars on jacks lying back to back. Till beat him with three fives. Till opened next with an ace in sight. Buck stayed, trying to pair a king in the hole. He did pair it, but Till won the pot. His hole card was an ace of spades.

"I'll buy us a drink," Till Petrie said, and got up at once and went out through the curtains.

He had barely vanished when Wynona came across to the table.

"Why won't you let him loan you some money, Buck? You're losing."

Buck leaned back in his chair and forced a smile. "Luck's a fickle thing, Wynona," he said. "It can change."

"Yes," she said. "But will it? Five hundred dollars would be a drop in the bucket to Till."

"Would it?"

"Don't be difficult, Buck!" Her voice was pleading. "I know you need the money to help Rube. Why let your pride—"

He cut in with a cold distinctness, "I think I've heard that before, Wynona. All right, I do have some pride, but that isn't what's stopping me from borrowing money from Till."

"He's your friend, Buck! Just before you came, he was saying that he wished he had a man like you working for him, if you were footloose and fancy-free. Someone had told him you were home."

"That's what I mean," Buck said. "Don't mistake me. Till is my friend, but I know him, maybe a little too well. When he does a man a favor, he expects a favor in return. It's his nature. I don't want to be obligated to him, tied up in some racket. . . . And I'm not footloose and fancy-free. I've got a young brother who needs help and moral support, maybe more now than he ever did."

She said contritely, "I understand, Buck. Forgive me."

He heard the sound of the barroom door opening and closing, and Till's returning footsteps beating steadily along the corridor. Buck didn't have much time, but he said the thing he had to say.

"Wynona, get out of this place. Stay out. You have too much courage to let yourself start working in a place like this."

"Sometimes it takes a lot of courage, Buck," she answered, "to do the thing you have to do."

She stood quietly looking toward the curtained entrance

as Till came in. Till approached and slid a mixed drink in front of Buck and sat down, lifting his own drink to his blue-tinged lips.

"What do you think of this place I've built, Buck?" he asked.

Buck smiled. "I've seen better in 'Frisco, Till. But not much better."

"Ha! That makes me feel good, Buck. How would you like a job here? Making contacts, you know . . . and maybe eliminating some competition."

Buck looked at the gambler narrowly. "Since when have you started having people eliminated, Till?"

Till laughed exuberantly. "I don't mean killing them, Buck. There are more subtle ways . . . like putting the fear of hell into a few cheap-John slickers."

"No, thanks," Buck Caldeen said.

Till downed his drink with a neat flourish and reached for the cards. "Still pounding the straight and narrow, are you, Buck?" he said. "Holding to the old belief that the meek inherit the earth, all good comes from heaven, and the wicked burn in hell? Eh?"

"I don't have a very clear-cut philosophy. Till," Buck answered. "Maybe that's my trouble. Deal."

He played the next four hands with a grim concentration, thinking of Rube and what the money might do for him. But luck was against him. He pushed in his last chips, banking on three tens. Till had three deuces in sight, but when he called the bet, Buck knew the gambler had beat him. They turned their hole cards over. Till had four of a kind.

They stood simultaneously, and Till thrust out his hand. They shook and Buck said easily, "Thanks for the chance, anyway, Till." He turned and went as calmly as possible toward the exit.

When he reached the curtained archway, he turned to look back. Wynona was standing beyond the gaming table, looking at him. So was Till.

"Don't let this be the last time, Buck," Till called.

"I'll see you, Till," Buck said, and went on through the corridor and across the barroom and out into the noonday sun.

He would have to approach Will Payne after all, he thought. He walked rapidly back to the ferry, boarded it just in time and crossed the river to the Fort Smith side. He went on toward the livery without pausing. An hour later, driving

the buggy, he left the ferry again on the Indian Territory shore and went swiftly through Moffett and out onto the Albert Pike Road.

It was hot. Sweat dripped from the flanks of the horse and oozed foamily from beneath the collar, but Buck kept driving steadily. Nearing Grassy Lake, he saw a man ahead in the road, his body shimmering in the heat-haze. He drove on and stopped when the man flagged him with his hat. The man was Nate Partain.

Nate had sobered considerably, but a bulge in the front of his shirt warned Buck that the man was using whiskey for a crutch. He had his gun on him, low-swung now, and he had taken time to smear polish on his high-topped boots. His shirt was still dirty and wrinkled, but his tie was straight. He recognized Buck at once.

"Well, Caldeen," he said, "so you aren't afraid to give me a lift?"

"Any reason why I should be, Nate?"

"Hell, no." Nate climbed to the seat beside Buck and pointed ahead through the bouncing heat. "But that damned Negro yonder on the wagon was scared. He circled through a corn field, just to keep from picking me up."

Buck drove on, giving Nate a cursory sideward glance. Nate's face was tight and hard, his lips set together like chiseled flint. He was not sick and despondent after an all-night binge; the crutch under his shirt had seen to that. Or maybe he was the kind who was never sick and sorry, Buck thought, but only arrogant, violent, mean.

Nate took the bottle from the front of his shirt and tilted it to his lips. He replaced it without offering it to Buck. He leaned over and looked at the horse, then around at the wheels of the buggy.

"Is this Nora Garland's rig?" he demanded.

"No."

"Whose is it?"

"It'll get us home, Nate," Buck said. "Whose rig it is doesn't matter."

Nate blew through his lips, making a sound like the throttled snort of a horse. "By God," he said, "Nora Garland slipped off from me. The bitch! She got all-fired high and mighty after you hit me at Looney Springs. How come you to hit me like that, Caldeen?"

"You asked for it, Nate," Buck said.

"Did I?" Nate laughed, but the sound was devoid of

humor. He swiveled on the seat and looked straight at Buck. "You aren't like your little brother George, are you, Caldeen?"

"I don't know, Nate."

"George wouldn't swat a mosquito," Nate Partain said. "George is so jumpy, he's crazy. He never wants to hurt anyone."

"George isn't crazy, Nate," Buck said softly.

"You want to hit me again, don't you, Caldeen?"

"I don't want to hit you, Nate. I'd rather talk to you. We've got a long time to talk, now. They tell me you saw Rube kill Murch Kenton. Why did Rube do that, Nate?"

Nate faced ahead. His hand touched his shirt front tentatively. His eyes got narrow and wary. "It wasn't a good enough reason for Rube to kill Murch," he said bluntly. "Not a thing like that."

"What thing?"

Nate squirmed. "Maybe it was lots of things. I don't know. I just happened to see Rube shoot him. Maybe Murch was doublecrossing him."

"How?" Buck asked.

"How? Hell, I don't know how! You think I ought to know all the ways to doublecross people? There are lots of ways."

"Tell me some of them, Nate."

Nate laughed mockingly. "Don't try to make a fool out of me, Caldeen. You aren't that dumb."

Nate had a way of mixing distinct, proper talk with a drawling vernacular. Buck had met many young men in the west with that same habit, educated men from the East, thrown too much in the company of frontiersmen, miners, timber workers and cowhands.

"Rube might be dumb," Nate added with a subtle challenge. "But not you. Rube's slow, and ignorant."

Buck let that ride, but the gnawing, insidious hatred for the man beside him was growing. He thought of Nate's outburst in the saloon, remembering the way Nate had pretended to pass out drunk. Nate's mind had been erratic from the fumes of whiskey, all right, but he had blurted out something he hadn't intended to say. Buck was certain of that.

"We'll catch that coon yet, if he doesn't hurry," Nate said, and Buck looked ahead and saw that they were overtaking the aged Negro man on the wagon.

It was a ramshackle one-horse rig, loaded heavy with red-oak rails. It was obvious that the gaunt gray mule hitched to

it was straining, almost exhausted. The old man turned and looked back, the whites of his eyes showing. He turned quickly and half stood and began to whip the mule. The whipping had no visible effect. The old man looked back again, covertly, and then he stopped the mule and got down and pretended to be working over the singletree. He didn't look up as the buggy neared.

Buck knew the old man was afraid of Nate. Perhaps Nate had brandished his pistol when the Negro passed him. Buck intended to drive on, but Nate reached across suddenly and caught the lines.

"Hold it, Caldeen! You wouldn't want to leave this coon in trouble, would you?"

He rose and jumped from the buggy, his boots striking soddenly against the earth.

Buck said sharply, "Get back on this buggy, Nate, if you want to ride with me!"

"I don't give a damn if I do or not," Nate answered. "Pappy Coon, here, he'll give me a lift . . . after I get through with him!"

The old man remained stooped over, but Buck, looking at the Negro's bony hands with their huge black veins, saw that they were trembling against the hard wood of the singletree. Buck waited, partly to protect the old man if Nate got rough, and partly to see how far Nate would go.

Nate circled the wagon in a shambling run and stopped suddenly. He looked at Buck and grinned. Then he reached out and touched the old man's shoulder, very gently, and said softly, "You're too old for this kind of work, aren't you, Pappy?"

The old man straightened and turned, his face lighting like the face of a man reprieved from the gallows. "Sho', now!" he said. "Sho', my hearin' sho' am failin'. Didn' heah nobody comin' atall! Didn' 'spect no company!"

"You've got some, Pappy," Nate Partain growled.

It got across to the old man then, just how it was going to be. He was trapped and he knew it. Probably he had been trapped many times during the hard, long span of his life. He glanced at Buck supplicatingly, and then fleetingly around at the young green corn. His feet in their run-down shoes made an uneasy shuffling.

"Don't run, Pappy!" Nate Partain hissed.

He took a quick step toward the Negro, his shoulders bunching. Buck's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Don't hit him, Nate!"

Nate lifted his head, his eyes throwing lances of hatred. "Drive on, Caldeen!" he said harshly.

"You heard me, Nate. Don't hit him."

Nate stilled like a man on the brink of a precipice. His face made a subtle changing while the aged Negro lifted palm-forward hands to Buck in a gesture of thankfulness.

"Why, I wasn't going to hit him," Nate said. "I wasn't going to hit you, was I, Pappy?"

"Shuckin's, no. I ain't done nothin'. I'se old, feeble . . ."

"How old are you, Pappy?"

" 'Bout eighty, come nex' March."

"Do you believe that, Caldeen?" Nate asked, smiling and turning.

"Leave him alone, Nate," Buck said. "Let's go, if you intend to ride with me."

"Let me see your teeth, Pappy," Nate said to the Negro.

The old man obligingly opened his mouth.

"You're some hoss, all right," Nate said. "I'll have to see your back teeth, though, before I can rightly judge your age." He reached out suddenly, the thumbs and forefingers of both hands catching the old man's lips. He spread them viciously. "Wider, Pappy," he said.

Buck set the brake on the buggy and wrapped the checklines tightly around it. He came to earth soundlessly, approaching Nate from behind.

He saw the old Negro cringe away from Nate, pressing back frantically against the edge of the wagon bed. Nate cursed and lunged forward, stretching the old man's thick lips apart and bearing him sideward and down.

Buck reached them and stooped over, catching the upthrust butt of Nate Partain's gun. He heaved it free of the scabbard and pitched it away.

"Nate!" he said, and watched the berserk man release the Negro and come upright.

Buck caught the collar of Nate's shirt and twisted it and drew him in. He slapped Nate right-handed, then shoved him violently backward. The wildness went out of Nate's eyes, and he sagged weakly against the ramshackle wagon, the same way he had at Looney Springs.

"Get on the wagon," Buck told the Negro.

The old man climbed up with surprising agility and whipped the gray mule on. Nate rolled aside and sprawled in the dirt, rubbing the side of his jaw where Buck had slapped him.

Buck glanced at Nate's pistol where it had fallen beside the road, and then walked across to the buggy. He paused with his back to Nate, giving Nate plenty of time.

He heard the scuffing sounds behind him and turned around. Nate was crawling frantically toward the pistol, looking at Buck over his shoulder, but when he saw Buck turn, he stopped.

"Go ahead, Nate," Buck said.

"I'll kill you for this, Caldeen!"

"Pick your gun up, then. What are you waiting for?" When he didn't move, Buck said coldly, "You want me to turn my back, don't you, Nate? Isn't that the way you killed that man you were talking about last night?"

It went into Nate like a driven wedge, but he revealed the shock of it for only an instant. He closed his eyes against the fear spilling out of them, and let a feigned shudder go through his body. He sagged down and stretched out like a man in a drunken stupor.

Buck walked past him and picked up the pistol and broke it. He took the cartridges out and flung them into the field of corn. He dropped the weapon down beside Nate and stooped and turned Nate over. Nate didn't move as Buck jerked open the front of his shirt and took the bottle of whiskey and emptied it out on the ground.

"You ought to be sober, Nate," Buck said, "by the time you walk on home."

He flung the empty bottle after the cartridges and got on the buggy and left Nate lying there. A hundred yards down the road, he turned on the seat and looked back. Nate had carried the pretense only far enough to effect his immediate well-being. He was on his feet and walking when Buck looked back. Rage and frustration caught Buck Caldeen as he drove on. What could be done about a man who was so savagely brutal, and at the same time, such a cringing coward?

Eight

WARD MAPEN'S PLACE WAS AN ISOLATED FARM ON LEE'S Creek, a mile above Star Ford. Buck halted the buggy at the barnlot gate an hour before sundown, and got down and stood waiting while old Ward and Emily came from the house to meet him.

Old Ward, a sturdy, bearded man in his early sixties, greeted Buck warmly and shook hands with him in a friendly way. Wynona's mother, however, showed distinct hostility.

"Where did you leave my daughter?" she demanded.

Buck answered quietly, "Didn't Wynona tell you she would stay in town?"

"Yes. But she didn't say where. Where did you leave her last night?"

"I left her at the Le Flore Hotel."

"I suppose everyone in the country saw you two riding together? They'll have plenty to talk about now!"

Ward Mapen said uneasily, "Emily, you don't have any call to offend Buck Caldeen."

"I don't care how many people my talk offends!" She faced Buck squarely, her eyes bright and accusing. "If you'd been half a man, Buck Caldeen, you wouldn't have left this country!"

"I'm sorry I did, Mrs. Mapen."

"Sorry! What good does that do now? If you'd stayed here like a man . . . if you hadn't been crazy jealous . . . she wouldn't have married that . . . that . . ." Emily Mapen choked up and bowed her head, covering her face with her hands. "Lord God!" she cried, "why did our family have to

be visited by such scandal! I hope my daughter never sets foot in our house again! I hope . . ."

"Now, Emily," old Ward said soothingly. He placed an arm around her shoulders and looked at Buck helplessly, then nodded toward the road.

Buck took the trail through the forest, swallowing hard to ease the tight constriction in his throat. He could understand how gossip had wrecked Emily Mapen's life. She had been a proud woman back in Tennessee, sprung from a wealthy southern family. The War had taken their property and had left her bitter. She had hated the Indian Territory from the beginning, Buck knew.

Once the solitude along this winding trail had induced pleasant reflections, but not now. Frustration and despondency were riding him hard, and the forlorn rush of the creek only added to his sadness.

That sadness and despondency held strong upon him far into the night while he talked to his brother George. George's fear had grown during Buck's absence. George paced the floor, saying over and over, "We've got to do something, Buck! We've got to get Rube out of there!"

"We'll do all we can, George. Are you in debt to Will Payne at Longtown?"

"Lord, yes! We can't ask him for any more credit, Buck!"

"I'll mortgage my horse and saddle," Buck said. "I'll put in a late crop to pay it back."

George said desperately, "We haven't had enough rain lately, Buck, and even if we had, it's too late. You don't know how good Will has been to us, but we can't ask him for any more money. Not five hundred dollars!" He stopped his pacing suddenly. "Kern Little came here this morning. Wanted to lease our upper sixty for the Johnson grass hay, and maybe for winter pasture. Rube would tear out of jail if he knew we even thought about doing it, but if we give the Garland Ranch a long enough lease . . ."

"No," Buck said flatly.

"Where you going to get that money?" George raved. "Rob somebody?"

"Settle down, George. Don't get crazy ideas. I'll find a way."

George stared at Buck without confidence, then said despondently, "Things were going pretty good until Rube got into that trouble. I . . . I aimed to get married soon, but now I can't."

"Why not? Sally Youngbird wouldn't expect too much."

"The crop I've got in won't get me out of debt, let alone pay back money we borrow for Rube," George said desperately. "I won't take a woman when I can't support her!"

Buck took off his boots and prepared for bed. "Get some rest, George. I'll see what I can do tomorrow."

Some time during that night Buck Caldeen compromised with his conscience and made his decision. He was up early next morning, preparing breakfast while George did the chores. They ate together, and George kept watching Buck uneasily, but they didn't talk.

Buck was saddling his big roan ten minutes later when George came out to the fence.

"George," Buck said, "I'm going to see how much money I can borrow from Mrs. Garland."

"Aw, Buck, you know better than that!"

"I understand they're a wealthy outfit," Buck said. "Why not? The Garland Ranch can give me a long-range loan, plenty of time to pay it back."

"You'd have to deal with Kern Little. He knows how bad Rube wanted that outfit out of here. He'll be hard to deal with."

"I'll borry from Mrs. Garland."

"What on?" George asked suspiciously.

Buck mounted and said quietly, "Just on my word."

He knew his brother was staring at him in astonishment as he rode away. The reluctance he had felt during the night returned to gall him, but he forced it aside again. It was wrong, he knew, for a man to play on the thing he had sensed in Mrs. Garland when he had left her at Looney Springs. But he needed to borrow from someone who could afford to wait. Someone who could wait until he had crops bringing in money, and maybe a few cattle on the upper sixty acres along the creek.

He thought bleakly as he rode along, "I don't want to get involved with her. Maybe I can just keep it friendly. . . ."

He passed the new home the Partains had built in Sunnygile Hollow, and found himself thinking how incredible it was that a man like Nate Partain could have sprung from a wealthy, respectable family. The place was a cluster of magnificence, a rich man's paradise set down in the heart of the Indian country.

The Garland Ranch was much the same, except for a more

solid look of permanence. The house was a huge structure two stories high, with jutting porticos and a wide porch encircling two sides. Cedar trees stood trimmed high in neat rows on the slope leading down to the floor of the valley. Corrals were large and strongly built, the barn a sprawling building with a yawning hallway reaching east and west.

Kern Little and two other riders were mounting their horses in front of the bunkhouse when Buck rode up. Kern recognized him and waved, then rode to meet him. The two riders sat quietly in their saddles, waiting in front of the bunkhouse.

"Well, Caldeen," Little said without preliminaries, "did George tell you about my offer?"

"Morning, Kern," Buck said, easing himself in the saddle. "Yes, George told me you'd like to lease some of our land. I'm sorry, but we aren't leasing. Is Mrs. Garland home this morning?"

"What do you want with her?"

"I just want a few words with her."

"I handle her business, Caldeen. You can talk to me."

"I'll talk to her, Kern."

"She won't see you."

"You announce me, Kern. We'll find out."

Kern Little shifted in his saddle. "Look here, Buck. You aren't going to try any pressure tactics, are you? Maybe like your brother Rube?"

"Did Rube try some pressure?"

"Not on Nora Garland. He tried pressing me."

"Why?"

"He didn't want cattlemen here. Do you feel the same way?"

"I haven't been back long enough to form an opinion, Kern," Buck said mildly. Then, casually, he asked, "How bad did the trouble get, between you and Rube?"

Kern Little shrugged. "Not to the shooting stage. To tell you the truth, I kind of respected his opinion. But I've got a job to do. It was getting a little dangerous, the way Rube was stirring up the Indians around here . . . Not that I'm happy about his trouble," he finished quickly.

"Thanks, Kern. Maybe Rube has always been a little . . . well . . . radical."

Kern smiled and turned his horse. "I'll announce you, Buck, but the results may be explosive."

"We'll see." Buck nudged the roan and followed Little to

the front yard gate, aware of the watching eyes of the two waiting riders upon him. Little dismounted and walked on and entered the house. He came out a few minutes later, smiling sheepishly.

"Tie your horse and take a seat on the porch," he said. "She'll see you."

"Thanks, Kern," Buck said.

He swung down while Little mounted and went to join his riders. They rode out fast down the slope of the valley, the gray dust swirling in their wake.

Buck went through the gate and heard the front door of the house open before he reached the porch. He stopped and saw Mrs. Garland standing with one arm resting against the white facing, looking at him while she assumed her conscious pose.

"Good morning, Mr. Caldeen," she said.

"Good morning." Buck took off his hat and went on as she motioned him forward. "Did I disturb you too early, Mrs. Garland?"

"Not at all." She came to the porch and arranged two chairs out of the sunlight. "It will be cooler here," she said, and sat down and waited, locking her hands primly in her lap.

Buck took the other chair and sat looking at her, conscious all the while of the thing in her eyes as she looked back at him. He thought suddenly, I wonder if a thing like this has missed a man like Kern Little?

He took the makings of a smoke from his pocket and asked politely, "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Of course not." She watched him intently. "Is something troubling you, Mr. Caldeen?"

She was man-crazy, Buck Caldeen thought, but he wouldn't have to play on that. She had given him too good an opening.

"Mrs. Garland," he said, "I've heard that you've been giving a lot of your time, trying to help people."

She was obviously pleased. "I try to help people, especially the Indians." She sighed. "Sometimes it's very hard."

"I'm sure it is, Mrs. Garland."

"You may call me Nora, if you like," she said. She laughed. "You said you hoped our next meeting would be more pleasant. Remember?"

Buck took a long, deep drag on his smoke. "Yes," he said. Then he said with suppressed haste, "Mrs. Garland, I'll be frank with you. I came here to borrow some money."

"How much?"

"Five hundred dollars."

She looked straight at him, measuringly. "You're a very direct man, aren't you . . . Buck?"

"I hope so."

She laughed. "I hope so, too. I hate people who try to be subtle. About this money . . . you do intend to stay in the country, don't you?"

"Yes. But I want long-range terms on the loan. I'd like to get a foothold here, start farming and raising stock. I think, in a year, I might be able to pay most of it back."

She waved a hand deprecatingly. "I won't be too concerned about that. You need the money to help your brother, don't you . . . the one in jail?"

"Yes."

For the first time, her eyes pulled away from him, throwing her narrowed, calculating glance across the slope and on into the sunny reaches of the valley.

"On certain conditions," she said, "the money might even be a gift."

He looked at her warily. "I don't want a gift. I don't want to impose on people. I don't want to be obligated, either, further than—"

"Don't you?" She was looking straight at him again.

"No," he said.

Her eyes held a subtle challenge. "Just what made you come to me?"

Buck said honestly, "Well, in the first place, I figured you'd be financially able to make the loan. And somehow . . ." He looked at her steadily." "Don't think I'm being presumptuous, but I had a strong feeling you'd be willing to help."

She smiled wanly. "Isn't it strange," she said, "how one feels these things about certain people? Believe it or not, when I watched you ride away from our camp that night, I had a feeling our meeting was only the beginning."

Her voice had such a sincere ring, Buck was half inclined to believe she was speaking the truth. He made no comment, and she got up at once.

"Wait a moment," she said, "while I go write you a check."

Buck waited for her, almost shamed that it had been so easy. She returned and handed the check to him and kept standing close to him when he rose.

"Buck," she said, "how would you like to start riding for

me?" He started to answer, but she didn't give him time. "Wait now! You wouldn't be taking orders from Kern. You're part Indian, and have many friends here. I need someone to help me in my charity work, someone to accompany me on my trips. Of course you know I can't ride out far alone in this country."

Buck took the first defense that leaped to mind. "I thought Nate Partain was serving in that capacity."

Her lips tightened. "Mr. Partain came here last night, and I made him pack his things. He is no longer serving here in any capacity. I found him very . . . shall we say . . . ineffectual?"

Buck deliberately put on his hat. She reached out quickly and touched his arm, her thin, shrewish face intense, determined. "You'll think about the job, won't you?"

"Yes," Buck said. "I'll think about it. And thanks for the loan."

She followed him to the edge of the porch and struck her pose against one of the round, white pillars. "You're welcome," she said. "Come back to see me, Buck."

He mounted the roan and sat for a moment looking at her, aware again of a faint compassion. Then he touched his hat and turned the roan and rode.

Nine

He struck the floor of the timbered valley and was crossing Sunnygile Creek when the feeling that he was being watched suddenly caught him. He stopped the roan in midstream, slacking on the reins with an outward show of letting his horse drink while his eyes searched the woods beyond him. Shadowy movement there drew his quick attention; and the next moment, filing across an opening along the trail, he saw the five young Indians.

Buck's glance flicked behind them, following the course of the trail up the opposite slope of the valley. No dust showed there, and he knew the Indians hadn't come that way. He would have seen them, coming down from the Garland Ranch. Those Indians had followed him along the trail from Little Lee's Creek, he thought, and had halted in the timber, watching his visit with Mrs. Garland. Now they had turned back on that same trail and were riding away.

Buck quelled the impulse to pursue them, and rode on slowly, thinking of what Brad King, the marshal, had told him about the Pins riding again and the trouble brewing between Indians and cattlemen. Rube Caldeen might have underestimated that trouble, Buck thought. Or had Rube deliberately tried to keep Buck in the dark?

George was plowing corn along Little Lee's Creek when Buck rode out of the timber a half-hour later and halted at the fence. George saw him and stopped the team, and then wrapped the checklines around the handles of the plow and came toward him.

Constant worry during the morning had increased the

strain on George Caldeen's face. Buck saw that at once as his brother stopped at the fence. George looked at Buck uncertainly, his eyes throwing their urgent question.

"I got the money, George," Buck said.

Surprise and relief crossed George Caldeen's face. He asked wonderingly, "How?"

Buck smiled wryly. "There are several ways a man can approach a woman for money, George."

George looked down and kicked at the turf with a heavy shoe. "I wish I'd had a chance to get some education, Buck. Traveling teaches a man things, don't it?"

"Some things, yes," Buck said. "But most of the education I have came from Dwight Mission school before the War. But education isn't everything, George. It's a man's character that counts . . . his ability to stick things out through the roughs."

George nodded. "Rube always told me that. He told me something else, too, Buck."

"What?"

"He said you got more education than any of the Caldeens, but it wasn't enough to hold the woman you wanted."

Buck was weighing an answer to that when George went on swiftly, "I guess that's the reason I took to Sally Youngbird. She's simple and easy to be around."

"She'll make you a good wife, George."

"Yeah. She's the kind of woman I want. Somebody to raise fine kids and cook good things to eat." He flushed. "I couldn't ever pass words with a woman like Nora Garland."

Buck said bluntly, "Slick talk didn't get this money, George. The word of a Caldeen is still good in this country. Don't forget it."

"It wasn't good enough at the Fort Smith bank," George said.

Buck smiled. "Don't always look at the dark side, George. Borrowing money at a bank isn't exactly a transaction between individuals. A banker represents the interests of a lot of people. You remember what I say. The reputation of our family is still good here."

For the first time since Buck's return, George's eyes held a light of trust. "Tell Rube I'll be in to see him soon," he said.

"All right."

Buck circled the field and rode on to the barn and fed and watered his horse. He prepared a quick meal in the kitchen

and ate it, and was returning to the barn again when he heard the sound of hoofbeats and saw a rider approaching along the road.

It was old Ward Mapen, riding at an easy jog trot. Buck waited at the barnlot gate as Mapen came on and halted.

"Get down, Mr. Mapen," Buck invited pleasantly.

"Haven't got much time, Buck. Just rode over to see you a minute. When you reckon you'll see Wynona?"

"I could see her today, if it's necessary. I'm going to Fort Smith."

"Would you take her a message from me?"

"I sure will."

Mapen eased himself in the saddle and sat looking out across the meadow. Through the momentary silence, Buck could hear the humming of insects and the far-away sound of a mourning dove.

"Ma talked pretty rough to Wynona, that day she left," Mapen said slowly. "But Emily is easy tore up, and I know she didn't mean it. She's been crying off and on ever since Wynona left."

Buck waited without speaking, seeing the sadness building on the old man's face.

"You tell Wynona she's welcome at home any time she wants to come back," Mapen said.

"I'll tell her that, Mr. Mapen."

The old man shoved his boots hard into his stirrups and drew his glance in from the field. "I don't want our daughter to get tangled up in them gambling affairs at Moffett. Till Petrie was always a pretty square shooter, but she might meet men that ain't."

Buck asked quietly, "Did Till come here to see her, before she left?"

"Yeah. Right after Kimes got in jail. Wanted to know if there was anything he could do to help her. I'm afraid he offered her a job."

"I'll tell her you want her to come home, Mr. Mapen."

"All right." Mapen turned his horse, then said belatedly, "I'll appreciate it, Buck, if you will." He rode off at the same steady jog trot, his aged but sturdy body swaying with the motions of his horse.

Buck saddled and mounted with a growing urgency upon him. He recognized the feeling for what it was. He had an excuse to go see Wynona, and he knew he wanted to see her, very much.

He slowed when he reached the forks in the road near the crossing of Polecat Creek, remembering Minnie Youngbird. She might want to send a message to Rube, he thought. The Youngbird home was only a half-mile eastward on the road leading to Short. He turned into that road and drew up at the Youngbird gate a few minutes later.

His face stilled suddenly as he halted. He saw Kick Youngbird rising from a bench in the shade of an elm in the hard-packed yard. Beyond Kick, sitting cross-legged on the earth, were the five young Indians Buck had seen along Sunnygile Creek.

They made no move to get up as Kick came to the gate and halted, but their sloe-black eyes, fastened intently upon Buck, showed a plain hostility. Buck noticed the crossed pins they were wearing on their hunting shirts. They were members of the Kee-too-wah.

"Good morning, Kick," Buck said. "Is your daughter Minnie home?"

Plainly unfriendly, Kick Youngbird reverted to the guttural talk of a full-blood. "Yah. She home. What you want?"

"I thought she might want to send some word to Rube."

Kick spat on the ground, and kicked dirt out over his spittle. "You go back to Fort Town today?"

"Yes."

"You go many places, soon," Kick said meaningly. "You lost hoss . . . cow . . . maybe fat hog on Garland place?"

Buck glanced at the five young Indians. "I went to the Garland Ranch, all right," he said. "I wasn't looking for a horse or cow, nor fat hog either. I was tending to business. Anything wrong in that?"

"Rube Caldeen . . . him never had business with Garlands."

"Rube's business is his business, Kick. Mine is mine."

Kick spat again. "You been gone long time," he said. "Maybe you need learn something."

Buck said calmly, "I'm loyal to my people, Kick, and to your people. I don't intend to sell out to Texans, Kansans, Missourians or anybody else. Strictly speaking, the Caldeen family wouldn't be judged as Cherokee. But we are Cherokees, Kick. We're enough Indian to hold rights to our land. We aren't like most whites, staying in this country only at the discretion of full-bloods. You want me to tell you something, Kick?"

Kick nodded.

"The time when an Indian can live by hunting and fishing

is just about gone," Buck said. "Cherokees will have to start farming and raising cattle. Many already are. There might be a few things to learn from a man like Kern Little."

"Maybe Little not bad man," Kick said. "That woman, though, she bad."

"Mrs. Garland? Why do you say that, Kick?"

Kick said gutturally, "I speak a thing I know. Her mouth drips talk like honey. She speaks soft words to the sick among us, but to a smart Cherokee her voice is like the hiss of a snake. She says her men will dam up these creeks so there will never be a scarcity of water. She says her men will cut these great trees so the grass will grow in the sunlight, making fine feeding grounds for deer and cattle. She says Indians near the Low Gap country will prosper. . . . But what good is this prosperity, when our brothers below the dams faint from thirst and never know the taste of fish or deer meat? We are Old Settlement people, but we are not selfish. We think of our brothers who came late."

"Why don't you go tell her these things, Kick?" Buck asked. "Misunderstanding of strange people is what causes trouble. The Garlands came from plains country, a country of little rainfall. If you tell her that to take the covering of timber off this land means ruination, maybe she would understand."

Kick lifted his eyes to the far hills and swept a hand out eloquently. "White men gave this land to the Indians. As long as grass grows and water flows, they said."

"You're holding to a dream, Kick," Buck said. "You really know better than that."

Kick's eyes mirrored a quiet reflection. "Maybe I go to talk to this Kern Little," he said. "You go in now and talk to Minnie." He went to rejoin the five Indians as Buck dismounted and tied his horse.

Minnie Youngbird was tying buckskin thongs around a rolled-up patchwork quilt when Buck entered the house. Sally stood watching, her dark face rapt, eager. They both looked at Buck as he paused just inside the door, but they didn't say anything in answer to Buck's greeting. They merely smiled.

Minnie finished her task and held the quilt out to him. "I make for Rube," she said.

Buck ran his hand across the quilt's gaudy colors. "Rube will be proud of this, Minnie. Anything you want me to tell him?"

She stood very straight and still, looking at him. Then she

nodded and lifted her hands, crossing them on her breasts in the Indian sign for love.

Buck looked beyond her and saw that Sally was smiling. He kept his own face straight and looked back at Minnie and nodded.

"I'll tell Rube, Minnie," he said.

He went out and tied the quilt to his saddle while Kick and the young Indians watched him. "Come to see us, Kick," he called as he mounted. "You fellows, too."

The young Indians were looking at Kick questioningly as Buck left them. Quiet-faced, Kick watched Buck go.

Buck kept thinking of Minnie Youngbird's sign for love as he rode, and gave a small new cabin nearby his close scrutiny as he passed it. He hadn't thought to ask George, but he was certain that Rube and Minnie had lived here. Sadness rose in him, and didn't fade out until he had made the long trip across the hills and down into the Arkansas River bottoms.

Thunderheads rose in the west like gray cottonwool, turning to a gun-metal blueness while he traveled. By the time he reached Moffett, those clouds had obscured the sun. He was half inclined to stop at Till's gambling hall and see Wynona on the trip in, but decided to finish his business in town first and stop there later. He wanted a long time alone with her, he thought, time for convincing talk.

He wouldn't get sidetracked by his feelings again, he told himself. Wynona's mother was grieving her heart out. He had to talk Wynona into returning home.

The wind came when he boarded the ferry, bending the willows along the shore and lifting the water of the river in scudding spindrifts. Dust and leaves whirled between the shanties of the Coke Hill district, and soared high into the elements above the grim bulk of the Federal Jail.

He left the ferry as soon as it docked, and sent the roan at a hard lope through the first huge, splattering drops of rain. He struck Garrison Street and went down that wide, storm-whipped stretch toward Texas Road and the livery, thinking of the quilt tied to his saddle. He didn't want to get it wet. He rode under the livery archway and swung down before the rain started in earnest.

He untied the quilt from his saddle and took it into the office occupied by Jibo Fain. A hostler took the roan away for feed and water, and Buck stood passing random talk with old Jibo while the rainstorm ran its course. When the

rain dwindled to a fine spray shot through with sunlight, he took the quilt under his arm and walked to the Federal Jail.

Frank Masters, the jailer, stopped talking to a group of marshals as Buck came in, and gave the quilt under Buck's arm a swift, cold-eyed appraisal. Buck, preoccupied with thoughts of Rube, didn't catch the meaning in the jailer's stare until he placed the quilt on a desk and started to unbuckle his gunbelt. Then Buck felt the thing seeping into him like a breath of cold swamp wind. He straightened up.

"Spread the quilt out, Caldeen," Masters said.

"Rube's Indian wife sent it, Masters," Buck said. "I don't think there's anything in it."

"Spread it out."

Buck complied, untying and unwinding the buckskin thongs and smoothing the quilt out on the desk top. Rolled up in the quilt, the bulge the Derringer made would never have been noticed. It was there, the small, sinister swell of it, held neatly in place by the stitching. In less than a minute, Masters had slit the quilt and taken it out.

"Good thing you have Brad King's recommendation," Masters said, holding the weapon in the palm of his hand. "I'll take your word that you didn't know anything about this." He reached for Buck's gun and rigging and put them away, then motioned for Buck to bring the quilt and follow him down the corridor. After the routine warnings, he left Buck in front of Rube's cell.

Rube got up from his bunk while Buck pushed the quilt gently between the bars toward him.

"Minnie sent you a bedroll, Rube," Buck said, smiling. "She also sent her love."

"Thanks, Buck."

Rube took the quilt and went back to his bunk and spread it out. He stooped, his long hands feeling the texture of it. "It's pretty," he said. "More colors than a speckled hound." He wheeled suddenly, his dark, Indian-like face dipping forward. "Who took the gun?"

"Masters." Buck watched his brother stand there, running his hands through his long straight hair. "That was a crazy thing, Rube. You couldn't break out of here."

"I didn't intend to. Some things are quicker than hanging."

"We're going to hire a good lawyer for you, Rube."

"Lay off, Buck! Don't waste your money and time!"

Buck said steadily, "I'm going to send Kohl Bishop here. Give him some grounds to go on. If you don't tell me or a

lawyer why you killed Murch Kenton, I'll turn the hills upside down finding out."

"You'll never do that. Nobody saw me kill him."

"Nate Partain did."

"Hell!" Rube said flatly. "Partain never said a word until Kenton's body was found and taken to Longtown. He never saw it! He's just trying to put himself in solid with the Garlands."

"If nobody saw you, why did you admit you killed Kenton?"

"They'd have pinned the killing on some innocent full-blood," Rube answered. "It was common knowledge that Indians didn't like the way Kenton was straddling the fence."

"Didn't you give Kenton a chance, Rube? Wasn't it self-defense?"

"Hell no!" Rube Caldeen said. "I shot him in the back when he tried to run!"

Buck stared at him. "Rube, I don't understand you."

"You never did." Rube didn't smile. "You didn't understand why I wanted to keep fighting after the War was over, did you? You think I'm a little crazy, because I won't stop something, once I start. . . . Buck, I'll tell you something. I killed Murch Kenton for a good reason; but that reason wouldn't be strong enough in the eyes of the law to keep me from hanging. Now you ought to know you're wasting your time. Don't ask any more questions."

Buck said tonelessly, "Then you won't ever tell me, Rube?"

"Yeah," Rube said. "Yeah, I'll tell you."

"When?"

"Maybe an hour before they hang me."

Buck had been so absorbed in the talk that he hadn't heard Masters returning. He was still staring at Rube incredulously when Masters stopped.

"Time to go, Buck," the jailer said, and turned away again.

Rube Caldeen was back at the bunk stroking the patchwork quilt when Buck left him. In the jailer's quarters, Masters handed over his gun and Buck buckled it on and thanked the jailer quietly and turned out onto the street.

He went to the bank and cashed the check Mrs. Garland had given him. A few minutes later he was in the office of Kohl Bishop, the lawyer.

"Before I hand over this money," Buck said, "I want to ask you a question. Is there a chance of saving a man from the gallows when he admits he shot a man down in the back, without giving him a chance?"

Bishop shook his head. "Not in the jurisdiction of Judge Parker."

"Then I suppose Rube's right," Buck said. "We're wasting our time."

Bishop ran a hand down his thin, pallid face and said meaningly, "Time. That's the word, Mr. Caldeen. We would have to play for time."

"What do you mean?"

"I have a certain strategy," Bishop said, "if you still want my services. As Rube's lawyer, I can postpone his trial. I can plead lack of time in which to arrange suitable defense."

Buck stared at the lawyer for a long time. "What are you going to do about Rube admitting the killing?"

"It might be possible to have everything he said at his preliminary hearing thrown out. I might hint that a confession was brought about through duress. I might even hint that your brother was irrational at the time. There are many ways to manipulate the law, Mr. Caldeen. I know all of them."

"Rube told me this evening that he didn't believe Nate Partain saw the killing."

Kohl Bishop leaned forward suddenly. "Did he? That has a good potential, Mr. Caldeen." He flattened his hands on the desk top. "There's another good reason for stalling for time. A long stretch in jail might make Rube change his mind. He might start fighting for freedom. He might want to give us some reasons."

Buck made his decision and started counting out the five hundred dollars, but a vague mistrust of the lawyer was in him as he left the office.

Buck went back to the livery and got the roan, and was soon aboard the ferry again, headed for Till Petrie's gambling hall to see Wynona.

Till was alone in the empty barroom, counting sheaves of greenbacks near the register. He greeted Buck with the same open friendliness, his black eyes shining happily; but when Buck asked for Wynona, the gambler's manner changed.

"She isn't here, Buck."

"Where is she?"

Till put away the money and poured two drinks. He slid the drinks to the edge of the bar and came around it, motioning toward a chair.

"Sit down, Buck."

Buck remained standing. "Thanks, Till, but I don't have

much time. Wynona's folks are worried about her. They want her to come back home."

Till took the chair himself and stretched his feet out. He held his drink up and looked into the glass reflectively. "Tell her folks to stop worrying, Buck. She's all right . . . but she won't be coming home."

"I might convince her that she ought to, Till," Buck said.

Till downed his drink and stood up. "Look, Buck," he said. "We've always been friends, and I hope it stays that way. But you know me. I get a set-up started, I don't like for someone to try to tear it down."

Buck's face concealed his tension. "What kind of set-up have you got started, Till?"

Till asked softly, "You're sure you want to hear it?"

"Yes."

"All right," Till said. "I bought a rooming house recently, over on the Fort Smith side. Wynona is going to run it for me. Along with the trade she gets there, she can put a lot of traveling men on the track of some high-stake gambling . . . right here!"

Buck looked around the room briefly. "Well, Till," he said, "at least that's better than having her working here, maybe with men pestering her all the time. I still want to talk to her, though."

"It won't do any good."

"It might. Where is this rooming house you bought?"

Till Petrie smiled. "It's the first big house on your left, Buck, after you leave the ferry. On First Street, I guess you'd say, though there isn't much of a street there yet."

Buck turned to go, then spun on a bootheel, feeling the hot blood surging against his temples. "Why, that's . . . !"

"Yeah," Till Petrie said. "It's the first house on the Red Light Row!"

Ten

BUCK STOOD THERE WHILE THE SHOCK COURSED THROUGH him and dwindled away, leaving a void of emptiness in him.

"Don't jump at conclusions, Buck," Till Petrie said. "Looking at you, a man might think . . ."

Buck said tonelessly, "Think what?"

"Why, a man might think you still care about Wynona, the way you act."

Buck straightened, feeling the anger roiling up inside him. "I'll stop this, Till," he said.

"Will you?" Till's black eyes were suddenly hard, ruthless. "It'll take some stopping, Buck. I'm warning you."

"I'll have to stop it. It'll kill her mother."

Till's laugh was brittle. "Let's just leave Wynona's mother out of this for a minute. Let's just hold it between you and me. I've been planning things for Wynona and ol' Till Petrie for a long time . . . even before you ran off and threw your chances away!"

"I never knew that, Till."

"You know it now."

"Why did you wait, then?" Buck demanded. "Why did you let her marry Kimes Montague?"

"She had to fall from her high horse, Buck. A woman is easier to bargain with then."

Buck said hotly, "Did you know what Kimes would do to her?"

"I knew their marriage wouldn't last."

"You're a hard man, Till," Buck said.

"Yeah. Pretty hard, when I'm going after something I want."

Buck gave the gambler his cold and appraising stare. "So you're going to make a bawdy-house woman out of her, are you, Till? You're going to take her to the bottom, then make her your wife?"

"After she gets a divorce from Kimes. Yes."

Buck laughed harshly. "I don't believe it, Till."

"Laugh if you want to," Till Petrie said. "Maybe my pride isn't the same brand you're packing. If I want a woman bad enough, she doesn't have to be an angel with shining wings. I look at her job this way: Loose women have to ply their trade somewhere. Wynona will manage them, keep a good, clean place for them to stay. She'll see that they meet the higher class men, not riff-raff—"

"And that'll put money in your pocket, won't it, Till?" Buck cut in.

Till nodded. "But I won't rob them, Buck. You and me have been good friends, but I'm afraid you haven't understood me. I was raised in poverty . . . so much poverty that a girl like Wynona wouldn't even look twice at me. It's different now. To keep it that way, I have to make money. See?"

"I see, Till." Buck turned to the door and opened it. He stood in the doorway, half turning, and light from the westering sun lay bright and revealing against his face. "Will you take Wynona the message I brought from her folks?"

"Sure," Till said. "I'll tell her they don't hold anything against her. I'll even drive her out for a visit sometime, after we're married and living in a good place in town. Until that time, she'll be helping in my business. And I'm not worried about that job taking anything out of her."

"All right, Till."

Buck closed the door behind him and walked toward his horse. His high-cheeked face was tight and bitter in the sunlight and his boots felt heavy on his feet.

He mounted and rode, and frustration and disappointment reached a peak of black despair as he traveled. Till Petrie's galling words kept echoing in his mind. "Maybe my pride isn't the same brand you're packing," Till had said.

"I wanted her," Buck said aloud. "I wanted her and I didn't let her know and now it's too late."

But as the hills drew close at hand under the first long shadows of sundown, he attained clear thought, and knew that it hadn't been pride that had stopped him, not entirely that. Pride wouldn't have been strong enough to stop him. It had been because Kimes Montague was in jail, unable to

put up a defense. It was a thing ingrained in Buck through years of training: Don't touch another man's woman. . . .

He crossed the hills and passed through Longtown, thinking briefly of Will Payne and Brad King, warmed by their remembered friendship. He would stop for a talk with them sometime soon, he thought. He kept traveling, reaching the summit of Eagle Mountain in the dusky darkness and starting on the long stretch downward.

Leaves of the towering red-oaks had a clean-washed smell after the quick spring downpour earlier that day. Hooves of the roan made a constant squishing on the red clay earth of the road, and whippoorwills sent out their resonant calling. Pale flares of lightning far to the east marked the path of the vanished storm. There had once been pleasure in this, Buck thought, coming down the mountain into the hills of home in the early darkness, but now he was conscious of a strange foreboding.

Strangely, he found himself thinking about something Rube had said. "One way and another, Buck," Rube had told him, "you and me have messed up our lives. We can't let it happen to George. . . ."

He would forget Wynona, Buck Caldeen thought resolutely. He had to. He had to shove her from his mind, and get his senses tuned to things in the hills. He had to start searching for Rube's motive for killing Murch Kenton. He had to save Rube from the gallows, somehow.

He would take word of Wynona to the Mapen family tomorrow, he thought. He didn't want to discuss her now. Not tonight.

He was splashing across Polecat Creek when the sound of the gunshot reached him; then another and another came on the heels of it, cracking sharp and loud and fading, sending echoes tapping off against the trees. He pulled the roan to a quivering standstill and sat in his saddle listening.

A hundred yards on his right was the mouth of the creek, where it spread its waters with the greater channel of Little Lee's Creek. It seemed to Buck that the sounds of the shots had come from across Little Lee's Creek, out of the timber near Kick Youngbird's home.

He was starting to ride on when the sound of hoofbeats came to him from the same direction, so muted at first they were like a drumming inside his mind. He held the roan and waited, judging the sound as it moved quickly closer. He

knew finally that a horse was coming on the main road leading from Short, approaching the intersection of the Longtown road directly ahead. A fast horse, Buck thought, big, making a solid pounding.

Buck sent his roan up the bank of Polecat Creek and let the big horse strike a fast run toward the crossroads. He reached the crossroads and stopped, and then reined into the bushes along the roadside, holding the roan quietly while the approaching horse slowed for the belly-deep crossing of Little Lee's Creek.

Buck drew his gun and wiped a down-striking hand against its cylinder, feeling the cylinder's easy spin. He held the gun against his thigh and waited, seeing the shape of the rider coming up the bank of the creek. The man was looking behind him as he spurred his horse into a run again, but fading light over the western foothills let Buck recognize him at once. The rider was Kern Little.

The Texan was facing ahead again when Buck's stentorian call struck against him. "Hold it, Kern!"

Buck sent his roan across the roadway, blocking it and watching Kern Little halt. He saw Little's hand drop down. Buck rose high in his stirrups, leveling his pistol.

"No, Kern," he said. "Don't do that! Who was doing all that shooting?"

The Texan strained forward, bearing so much weight in the stirrups that his saddle creaked.

"Caldeen!" he breathed. "What are you doing here?"

Buck said tightly, "I might ask you the same question, Kern. Do you know who was doing that shooting?"

"No."

"Didn't it come from Youngbird's place?"

"I'm afraid it did."

"Afraid? Why?"

"I don't know. I'm just afraid, that's all. That's why I was riding hell-bent away from there. I don't want . . ."

He swiveled around suddenly in his saddle, letting his voice trail off. Buck heard the sound at that same moment . . . the high, keening wail of a woman that chilled through him like a bleak wind across icy wasteland. He remembered it and recognized it. He had heard it once at Looney Springs and would never forget it.

Something had happened at the Youngbird home. Minnie Youngbird was screaming.

Buck spurred the big roan forward. "Coming with me, Kern?"

"Yeah. If you say so."

The Texan turned his horse and sided Buck toward the crossing. They surged into the current and across it and up the bank, sending their horses into a run, while the sound of Minnie Youngbird's screaming became lost in the pound of hoofbeats and the rush of wind.

Buck slowed at the turnoff toward the Youngbird gate, feeling unease and caution mounting in him. He heard Kern Little's horse slowing beside him, and he turned briefly, giving the Texan one swift and appraising look. Little's hands were in plain sight above the pommel of his saddle, both gripping the reins. Buck faced ahead then, seeing the light spilling from the open doorway of Kick Youngbird's home, and the two dark shapes there near the gate, stooping over a prostrate form.

Kick Youngbird was dead. Buck sensed it even before he halted the roan and dismounted and saw Kick's body sprawled laxly on the hard-packed earth of the yard.

Minnie and Sally Youngbird straightened up and stood staring at him with luminous, sloe-black eyes, their faces stilled and expressionless. Beyond them in the open doorway stood a small boy, Kick Youngbird's son, barefooted and rooted to the puncheons with shock.

Buck asked the first question that came to mind. "Who did this, Minnie?"

She shook her head and kept staring at him. Perhaps her stoical cheeks had never known the feel of tears, Buck thought, but the sting of them was there, welling behind her eyes.

"Didn't you see anybody, Minnie?" he pressed.

"I see nobody. I hear guns. Sally see nobody. We come out . . ." She spread her hands. "Our father is dead. Somebody killed him."

Buck glanced at Sally Youngbird and saw that she had lifted her head and was staring straight at Kern Little.

The Texan was still in his saddle. He had pulled off his hat and was holding it in front of him.

"Give me a hand, Kern," Buck said. "We'll carry him inside."

The Texan put on his hat and dismounted. He came forward with a steady stride, and stooped as Buck stooped,

helping Buck lift Kick's body and carry it inside the house. They laid Kick out on a bed near the door, and Buck pulled a quilt up over the dead man's face.

The Youngbird kid wasn't crying yet, but his shoulders were jerking. Buck laid a hand across the kid's shoulders and gently turned him outside.

"Stay out here for a while, sonny. You watch things. You watch things like a man, like your father did."

Minnie and Sally had come to the edge of the porch. Minnie reached out and took her young brother's hand and drew him close to her. She began to make small sounds, half-crying, half-crooning. Sally Youngbird turned soundlessly and went around the house into the darkness.

Kern Little was walking toward his horse. "I'll go get Nora," he said. "She knows how to do things."

"I wouldn't do that, Kern."

Little paused, stiffening.

"Let me see your gun, Kern," Buck said.

"You think I killed him?"

"I didn't say it, but I want to have a look at your gun."

Little turned his back slowly and stood very still. "Lift it out then, Buck. I won't draw it."

Buck walked forward and took the gun from Little's scabbard. He broke it and saw that it held five unfired cartridges. He smelled the muzzle briefly, then thrust the gun back and said quietly, "No offense, Kern . . . besides, I can clear you, if any questions are asked. It isn't that I don't want you to bring Mrs. Garland, either, but I know these people wouldn't want her."

Kern Little nodded. "Another thing, Buck. Maybe I'd better tell you why I'm here tonight."

"Yes."

"Youngbird came to the ranch today. He told Nora he wanted to talk to me. I was gone, but as soon as she told me, I came here, alone. I heard all those shots just before I got here, and I was afraid I was riding into something. I got away fast. I thought it was the best thing to do."

"All right, Kern." Buck paused and turned to Minnie Youngbird. "I'll have everything taken care of, Minnie. I'll send George over right away. I'll get word to the Paynes at Longtown, and bring the marshal out. We'll find whoever it was that did this."

Minnie was leading her brother into the house as Buck and Little mounted and rode away.

Little said uneasily as they neared the crossroads, "I want to help, if you need me. It doesn't seem right, living here and not taking any part in things like this."

"I know how you feel, Kern. If you want to, you can go tell George while I ride on to Longtown."

"Sure."

They separated at the crossroads and Buck forded Polecat Creek again, heading southward up the high, dark swell of the mountains. The need for a talk with Brad King and Will Payne was strong in him, intensifying as the miles swept behind him.

Some insidious force was loose in the hills, and it was beyond Buck's powers to grasp it. He had been gone too long, and far travel had altered his perspective. The old, intense loyalty and love for the Cherokee Nation wasn't as strong in him as it had once been, as Rube Caldeen had understood and hinted at recently. Elusive attitudes and implications that would have struck the mind of Kick Youngbird had seemed to escape Buck so far.

Who had hated old Kick enough to kill him from ambush? Surely not some member of the Garland Ranch. Kern Little was the foreman, and Buck had judged too many men rightly to doubt his opinion of Kern. The Texan was a man of compassion and understanding. Buck felt certain of that.

"The Pins are riding again," Brad King had said, and Buck knew that was true, but he had not heard of any open violence until tonight. Old Kick had probably been the leader of the local Kee-too-wah, but Kick hadn't struck Buck as a man given to violence. Yet, Kick was dead, and Buck was forced to the thought that it might have been enmity between the Pins and the Knights of the Golden Circle that had caused this trouble. The tentacles of War were far-reaching feelers, and the old enmity might be flaring anew. Kick's young Indian friends might have been raiding somewhere near the old council grounds of John Ross.

Somewhere in the hills, Buck thought, were the answers to a lot of questions. Somewhere in the hills was the source of the thing that had made Rube Caldeen kill Murch Kenton. Somewhere, also, was the answer to why Kick Youngbird had been murdered.

I'm going to start riding tomorrow, Buck Caldeen thought. I'm going to camp on the trail of every Indian I find riding the Low Gaps. I'm going to question the chief of every clan

from Blackbird Ford on Lee's Creek to the Cherokee capital at Tahlequah. If it takes all summer, he thought, I'll find the answers.

Kohl Bishop would stall Rube's trial, he thought, and give him plenty of time.

Eleven

BUT TIME COULD FLOW PAST LIKE A SWIFT-RUNNING RIVER, leaving a man stranded and despondent on an island of fruitless quest.

More than a month later, camped deep in the hills north of Tenkiller Ferry, Buck sat staring into the embers of his fire and knew that he was no closer to the answers he needed than he had been that night when he had ridden to Longtown to make arrangements for Kick Youngbird's funeral.

He had talked with Brad King for a long time that night; and next day, after the funeral, he had accompanied the marshal to the Garland Ranch. Nora Garland had promptly verified Kern Little's story. Then, looking at Buck with that strange, almost brazen awareness, she had expressed sympathy for the bereaved family of the Indian, and had offered to help Minnie and Sally in any way she could.

Later that day, Buck and the marshal had questioned Minnie and Sally, but the Indian sisters, stoically hiding their grief, had sworn that the reason for the killing was beyond them. They had insisted, too, that they had never known why Rube Caldeen had killed Murch Kenton.

"I think maybe Rube just hate that man," Minnie had stated simply.

The five young Indians whom Buck had seen at the Youngbird home had vanished, and long hours of riding and persistent questioning had failed to uncover any leads on them.

During the week following the funeral, Buck had ridden

extensively with the marshal, contacting and questioning local Cherokees about Kick's affiliation with the Pins. The answers they had received had been vague, evasive. Buck had gone alone then to the Fort Smith jail and had talked with Rube.

Rube had been stunned at the news of the murder; then, as had always been his way, he formed his opinion swiftly.

"Buck, you keep close tabs on cattlemen! I don't think an Indian killed old Kick! Indians have their councils, and keep out scouts in the hills; they grumble about old traitors, and boast of their own exploits under the leadership of Chief John Ross or General Stand Watie, but none of them want killings. They're afraid of the U. S. Army. You watch those cattlemen close. Kick might have aroused their enmity."

Rube had admitted that Youngbird had long been a powerful member of the Kee-too-wah, but had insisted that the Indian had never sanctioned violence. Old Kick had always had a healthy respect for the soldiers stationed at Fort Gibson; also, he had respected the tribal courts.

Later, Buck had visited Wynona's parents, belatedly taking them news of her and then questioning old Ward about the thing Wynona had once told him: that her parents thought Rube's killing of Murch Kenton had been tied in somehow with the trouble she had had with Kimes Montague.

"We said too much," the old Tennessean had answered sadly. "We raved and ranted, but most of what we said to Wynona was just born of the bitterness we felt toward Kimes."

Frustrated at every turn, Buck had finally packed a camping outfit on the roan and had told George that he might be gone for a long time in the mountains. He had ridden off into the late evening shadows, silently vowing to scour the country for weeks or months, until he had found Rube's motive for killing the Indian agent, and the reason for the wanton murder of Kick Youngbird.

He had ridden every lonely by-path in the Low Gaps, spying on bands of Indians and trailing riders from the Garland Ranch. Though he had found out that the cowhands and the Indians were obviously wary of each other, he had witnessed no hostile moves from either side. He had ridden out of the Low Gap country then and had traveled far and wide across Northeastern Indian Territory, talking with leaders of both

the Pins and the Knights of the Golden Circle. He had come to the conclusion at last that violence would never break out between members of those rival societies as long as soldiers were stationed at Fort Gibson.

Buck had ridden at last into that serene old army post on the bank of the Grand, and with the aid of the provost marshal there, he had traced Murch Kenton's background. He had discovered that Kenton's service in the army had been spent on the western plains. Buck was convinced that Rube had never come in contact with Kenton before or during the Civil War, and therefore the trouble had not been the outgrowth of an old hatred.

Buck sat by his fire with his mind caught up in memories, while loneliness crept at him out of the shadows. For days he had known no company except that of his big roan horse.

There was a growing certainty upon him now that he had searched too wide. Brad King's opinion of the Kee-too-wahs had obviously been shaped and colored by the gossip of uneasy white settlers, and perhaps by the misguided talk of some Federal investigator who knew little or nothing about the affairs of the Cherokes.

"I've missed the source of the trouble," Buck thought bleakly. "It's an isolated thing, somewhere there in the Low Gaps. Tomorrow, I'm going home."

He got up and spread out his bedroll, then doused the fire and sat for a moment half reclining against his saddle. Sounds of the woods made their familiar stirrings and whisperings around him, but for many nights in succession those sounds had brought no peace. These hills that Buck once had loved were gradually becoming associated with thoughts of disappointment and tragedy; and always at night came recurring memories that hurt and embittered him.

He stretched out at last and looked up through the windless darkness; and, as always, thoughts of Wynona came. Her face was there in the night to haunt him, and the remembered sound of her voice, filled with its urgent question. . . .

"Do you still love me, Buck?" she had asked.

He roused before daylight and broke camp hurriedly, conscious of a strange urgency, and of a premonition that he could not shake off.

Throughout that long day he rode steadily, working his way through the Cookson Hills and across the blackjack-thicketed swell of Brushy Mountain. It was late when he passed the old

Scratchout church and crossed the branch and the foothills south of it, coming into the edge of Longtown from the west.

He recognized Brad King's horse at the tie rail in front of Will Payne's store, and reined in beside it and dismounted. Low-voiced talk from the store's interior came to him while he went up the stoop of the porch and entered.

The store was filled with the gathering shadows of twilight; Will Payne hadn't bothered to light the lamps. Buck paused just inside the door, letting his eyes adjust to the dimness. Presently he saw the deputy marshal and the storekeeper sitting close to each other on the old oak bench against the wall.

They rose and greeted him warmly, both offering their hands. Buck shook hands with them, then lowered himself wearily onto the bench and rolled and lighted a smoke. They sat down on either side of him.

"Has George been in lately, Will?" he asked.

Payne cleared his throat. "I saw George yesterday, Buck. He said he thought you'd left again for good."

Buck smiled. "I don't think George trusts me much. I told him I'd be gone quite a spell. Was he worried?"

Payne said slowly, "Buck, you know how George is. I think he'd have been out of his mind these last two days, if it hadn't been for his wife."

Buck said in astonishment, "Wife? Did George marry Sally Youngbird?"

"They got married about two weeks after her father was buried."

"I'm glad," Buck said, conscious of the first happiness he had felt in weeks. Then, belatedly, Payne's other remark struck him. "What do you mean, George about out of his mind?"

The storekeeper looked across at the marshal. Brad King uncrossed his legs and stretched his feet out and sat for a moment looking at the scuffed tips of his boots. When he spoke, his voice was almost gruff.

"Rube got his sentence yesterday."

"What!"

"He's sentenced to hang for murder."

The swift, impelling force of it drew Buck upright. He stood with the smoke he had drawn in from his cigarette webbing thinly through his lips.

"What happened to that lawyer I hired?" he asked. "Bishop said he would stall the trial!"

King said bluntly, "You wasted your money on Bishop. I could have told you that. Bishop's a has-been, playing on the record he made before Judge Parker's time. No lawyer, not even Bruce Warren, could have stalled Rube's trial for long."

Buck stared down at the marshal while the clamoring urgency of another question stormed through his mind.

"When?" he asked. "When will it be?"

King stood up and placed a hand on Buck's shoulder. "For some reason, the Judge gave Rube a long wait. It's set for the ninth of next April."

"Then we'll appeal that sentence!"

King shook his head sadly. "I told you before, Buck. The Judge has complete and final jurisdiction. You can't appeal. I think the long wait is to try to get information out of Rube . . . information about this brewing Indian trouble."

Buck said curtly, "I think you've been misled, King. You've listened to too much gossip. I've spent a month on the trail and I can't find any sign of Indian trouble."

"I'm watching things close, though," King answered. "I have orders to do so."

Buck took a restless half turn around the room, then stopped and faced King again. "Did Nate Partain testify against Rube?" he asked.

"Yes."

"How did Rube take that?"

"He got violent, just as I expected. He called Nate every kind of liar."

"Where's Partain now?"

"He's back home, staying with his folks. I hear that he isn't drinking much now. Maybe he'll straighten up."

Buck looked at the marshal narrowly, fighting for composure. "Did you find out who killed Kick Youngbird?"

King shook his head. "No. I think it was some member of a rival Indian clan . . . somebody who wanted to stop Kick from organizing too many hot-headed young full-bloods."

Tentacles of a mounting rashness showed in Buck's dark glance. "Have you found anything that might spread some light on Rube's case?"

"No." The marshal's gaze met Buck's squarely. "I'll tell you what I think, though. I think Rube found out that Kenton wasn't giving the Indians justice in his reports to the agencies. Rube probably met Kenton in the woods, challenged him to a gunfight, and when Kenton welched and started to run, Rube shot him down in a heat of passion."

"I don't believe that, King!"

"That's your privilege, Buck," the marshal answered softly. "But there are some things a man can't dodge. I think Rube just hated to admit to his brothers that he had stooped to cold-blooded murder . . . that he had shot a man in the back without good reason."

Buck looked at Will Payne, catching the embarrassed sideward flicker of the storekeeper's eyes.

"Brad doesn't mean any offense, Buck," Will said. "The marshal's your friend. I know it."

Buck suppressed the stirrings of rage inside him and impulsively offered his hand to the marshal. "Sure, Will," he said. "I know it, too." He felt King's firm handclasp, murmured, "Thanks, men," and turned and went out through the doorway.

He stopped at the edge of the porch and mashed his cigarette out between thumb and forefinger, feeling some faint satisfaction at the burn of it as he hurled its remnants away. . . . A man needed something tangible to fight, he thought, and stood letting reaction have its way with him, yearning for the old days of violence. The strain of hard days in the saddle and long nights of brooding had stored up too many things in him, and now this news about Rube had set fire to the fuse of dormant emotions.

He breathed deeply of the rising night wind and watched the lights coming on in the houses, and gradually he fought those feelings from him. Concern for George rose in him suddenly. George would be grief-stricken, desperate. He had to get home to George. . . .

The sound of hoofbeats and turning wheels at the intersection of the Bellefonte road drew his attention. He straightened and stood looking across the dusk. He saw the quick-stepping team of horses hitched to the low-slung open phaeton, and he watched the horses and the vehicle turn sharply and enter the street. A man and a woman were on the front seat, and in the rear was the indistinct shape of a broad-hatted figure. The vehicle halted with a muted squeaking of brake-blocks, directly in front of the store.

Buck's attention riveted on the man in the rear seat. He was stepping out of the phaeton, his body making a slight weaving motion as his boots struck the dusty street.

Buck recognized Nate Partain.

Buck heard the woman's voice, low, uneasy. "Don't be long, Nate, please."

Nate laughed. "What are you scared of, Mama? I just aim to ask for the mail."

The man on the driver's side said firmly, "No foolishness, son. Hurry."

Buck moved aside slightly, watching Nate approach the steps of the porch. Nate lifted his head and saw Buck and came to a sudden stop.

"Hell!" he breathed softly. "Caldeen!"

Buck nodded briefly and started down the steps past him. Nate lurched sideward, blocking the way.

"Not so fast, Caldeen! I want a little talk with you!"

Buck came against him and reached to shove him aside. Nate belched, and the smell of whiskey flared rank and sour from his loose-lipped mouth.

"You didn't quit long, did you, Nate?" Buck murmured, and strode on toward his horse.

He paused there, half turned, and saw Nate wheel and come toward him. Nate stopped three paces away, and light from a window across the street illumined his gun hand. He was already gripping the butt of his pistol.

"You've brow-beat me too much," he said harshly. "There's one thing I balk at! I won't let you take my woman!"

Buck squared around with a calm and arresting flow of movement. "Don't try to throw a gun on me, Nate," he warned.

"I'm handing you a piece of advice," Nate said. "Stay away from Nora Garland!"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The hell you don't!"

"Nate, please!" Mrs. Partain cried.

Buck glanced past Nate, seeing Brad King easing down the steps from the porch. The marshal had his gun in his hand, holding it loosely.

"Tone down, Nate," King said. His voice held an unruffled humor. "You're disturbing the peace."

Nate spun on a bootheel, releasing the butt of his gun at the same instant.

"So-ho!" he muttered. "You're taking sides!"

It was a pleasant thing to watch the marshal, Buck Caldeen thought . . . the way the lawman moved close to Nate and reached out with his left hand and took Nate's pistol.

King faced the man on the phaeton and made a brief, nonchalant gesture northward. "Mr. Partain, I think you'd better take him home."

The elder Partain nodded. "Keep his gun, Marshal. He has had too much to drink. . . . Nate, come on!"

"Hell! I haven't even asked for my mail!"

Will Payne called from the porch, "There's no mail for you, Nate. You do what your father says."

Nate stayed where he was, wide-legged and belligerent. He cursed. "Nobody's going to run me off!"

King holstered his gun and stood watching Nate speculatively. When the marshal spoke, he directed his question to Nate's father. "Have you folks just come from Fort Smith?"

"That's right," Mr. Partain answered.

King's voice had an edge to it. "How much whiskey did you cross the line with, Nate?"

Nate Partain wilted. He looked quickly at his father and then back to King; he got very still, holding his head tilted sideward as if listening to some far-off warning voice. Wordlessly, he went in front of Buck and climbed to his seat in the back of the phaeton. The team went forward, circling short in the street and backing and turning. Buck had the feeling as he watched them leave that the elder Partain, doing the driving, was caught up in a seething rage.

"It was a temporary thing, Brad," Will Payne said from the store porch.

"Nate's stopping drinking? Yeah," the marshal said. "It's too bad. His parents seem like fine people."

Buck asked a question he had neglected to ask before. "Have you ever cornered Nate about that talk he made in the Fort Smith saloon, Brad? . . . that talk about killing a man?"

King nodded. "He said he was just drunk and bragging."

"Do you believe that?" Buck asked.

"Yes. Nate's a spoiled, cowardly braggart, Buck. You know that."

"He came close to being a dead braggart tonight," Buck said, and rose to his saddle. Lamplight struck against him, lifting muted color from the smooth walnut handle of his gun. That same light played on him as he rode away, shining on the blackened skillet tied to his saddle and on the grass-stained roll of his pack. When he turned into the Bellefonte road he glanced back once and saw King and Payne staring after him.

Vague sadness caught Buck Caldeen suddenly. Even the warmth of their friendship held little comfort for him now. His feeling for them was changing, like his love for the hills

had changed. Despondency had held him in its clutch for too long a time, he thought. Unless he could fight free of this thing, all the goodness in the world would be lost to him . . . as the world itself would soon be lost to Rube. . . .

Twelve

CANDLELIGHT MADE A MUTED BRILLIANCE IN THE CALDEEN living room, intensifying the oppressive silence that reminded Buck of that other night when he had first come home from Oregon.

George Caldeen blurted at last, "Why don't you say something, Buck? My God, don't you know Rube's almost the same as dead?"

Buck looked at the smooth, cold surface of the chimney hearth and listened to the soft footsteps of Sally Youngbird . . . Sally Caldeen now . . . as she prepared supper in the lean-to-kitchen.

"We'll talk about it later, George," he answered.

"Didn't you find out anything, Buck?"

"If I had," Buck said, "it's too late now."

"Did you?"

"No."

George's voice was thick with emotion. "I saw Rube a week ago Monday. I told him you was scouting the hills, trying to find a way to help him. He seemed glad you were gone, but now I know the reason. He knew his trial was coming up, but he didn't tell me. He didn't want either of us there. I don't understand it! Why did he want to brace this thing alone?"

Buck said quietly, "Rube never wanted to saddle others with his troubles, George."

"No," George said chokingly. "Rube's that way, all right. . . . Buck, how are we going to save him?"

"Maybe we can't." Buck stood up, facing his brother with

a grim resolution. "But you aren't a kid now, George. I know you've depended on Rube, maybe too much; letting him make your decisions, guide your life. But now you're a full-grown man, married. You have Sally to think about now. Don't weaken. Rube wouldn't want you to worry yourself to death."

George got still, listening to Sally's footsteps. He said haltingly, "I . . . couldn't stand it, the way it hurt her about old Kick. I . . . wasn't financially able to jump into marriage, but . . . seemed like I had to bring her home with me."

"That's the way Rube wants it, George." Buck watched his brother intently, then asked as another thought struck him, "Is Minnie at home, keeping the Youngbird kid?"

"She took the kid and went to Fort Smith as soon as she heard about Rube's sentence. She said she would camp on the river, close, there where she could go see Rube every day."

Sally came to the kitchen doorway. She stood looking at them while the candlelight softened the smile on her dusky face. "George," she said, "you men come eat."

They followed her back to the kitchen and were soon seated around the sturdy oak table. She sat close to George, directly across from Buck. She was good to look at, Buck thought, and felt the comforting warmth of her simple nature. She was sturdy and full-breasted, no longer a child. She would be good for George, Buck thought.

But she was making no attempt to eat, and Buck sensed a strange urgency upon her. It showed in her slightly parted lips and the dark, steady look she gave him. It was a look that searched him, down to the depths of him, and left him with a faint unease.

"What you find out, Buck?" she asked abruptly.

"Nothing. I'm sorry. Nothing at all."

She reached out and took bread from the platter and slowly began to eat. "You gone long time," she said. "Your woman come looking for you."

"Aw, Sally . . ." George began, then flushed and looked down at his plate.

"That Garland woman," Sally said.

Buck's face showed no reaction. He shrugged resignedly. "Guess she's worried about that money I borrowed, Sally," he said.

"She not looking for money. She looking for man."

There had been a time, Buck Caldeen thought, when he

couldn't have helped laughing at that. "You have a strong imagination, Sally," he said now.

"She no-good woman, Buck," Sally said. "My father, he once say she bad. She tangle you, Buck. She trap you."

"Don't let it worry you, Sally." He changed the subject at once. "We'll go see Rube tomorrow. We'll start early, after a good night's sleep.

Sally shook her head. "I stay here. I don't like to see him. That jail bad. George go with you. . . . Maybe that Garland woman come here again. I tell her go 'way. She bad."

Buck finished eating and pushed back his plate and rose. He said lightly, "Forget about Nora Garland, Sally. She isn't going to tangle me up."

Yet, far into that night, his mind was filled with nagging, persistent thoughts of the widow. She had come searching for him. He had misjudged her, he thought; he hadn't believed she would go that far. The Indian strain in him, the superstition, sent his mind reaching out on elusive tangents, building a premonition that he had long since learned not to ignore. There was something about her, he thought; something subtle and vaguely repulsive that had nothing at all to do with her obvious, almost brazen desire for him that had got across to him quite suddenly, even at their first meeting at Looney Springs. . . .

Stark worry about Rube's plight finally invaded his thoughts of Nora Garland, scattering them and consuming them. How would he find Rube tomorrow? What change had a death sentence made in him? . . .

The jail was swarming with U. S. Marshals and Indian lawmen. Excitement was running wild. A crowd milled outside the old barracks wall, talking raucously, and Buck wondered if another hanging was about to take place here.

Frank Masters, the jailer, gave Buck and George his cold, suspicious stare. "You fellows'll have to wait a few minutes, then go in one at a time. Rube's Indian wife and the kid have just gone in." Masters smiled thinly. "I let the youngster pass, but I searched him. I haven't forgotten that quilt business."

Buck and George found a seat on a bench and waited.

Minnie Youngbird came out, leading her small brother. The Indian woman walked with lowered head, like some grief-stricken squaw trudging through a strange forest. When Buck spoke to her briefly, she stopped and stood looking at him, her face expressionless.

"Do you want to go back home with us, Minnie?" Buck asked.

"No. I stay here. I found good camp on river. Warm. I stay till winter."

"Do you have money for food?"

She nodded. "I got money from Payne store. That Payne good man. That King marshal, he good man, too. He tell jailer, let us see Rube two times day. We good now. Eat. Live. See Rube two times day. Good-bye."

She shuffled out through the crowd of deputy marshals, her shoulders drooping under the gaudy scarf tied around her hair.

The jailer was waiting impatiently. "All right, George," Buck said, and watched George get up reluctantly and follow Masters through the doorway leading into the corridor.

Buck rolled a cigarette and fired it up and sat drawing in and expelling the smoke. The talk of the marshals and the shifting of their heavy boots began rasping against his nerves. George came out at last, white-faced and straining to control his panic.

"Rube's breaking, Buck," he said huskily. "He can't stand still! He's . . ."

Buck said quietly, "Go out and wait in the hack, George."

Buck followed Masters along the corridor, listening with a strange abstraction to the quick-tapping echoes of their footfalls. Another sound came to him like a small wind rustling, and suddenly he knew what it was. Whispering . . . the constant, sibilant whispering of prisoners.

"I don't want any hysterics," Masters said curtly. "Not like your brother started to throw."

Buck stopped. "You mean George?"

"Yeah."

"Don't worry," Buck said evenly. "Another thing. Masters. I want to talk with another prisoner this time."

"Who?"

"Kimes Montague."

The jailer stiffened and threw a hard, searching glance at Buck. "Why are you interested in Montague?"

"I have my reasons. I want to see him."

"You waited too long," Masters said coldly. "Kimes Montague is dead."

"Dead?"

Masters nodded and drew a glittering object from his

pocket. "He slashed his wrists sometime last night, with this. He bled to death."

Buck stared at the object in the jailer's hand and felt a chill course through his body. It was a portion of the crossed pins of the Kee-too-wah, honed to a razor sharpness!

"We're trying to find out who slipped it to him," Masters said. "Do you have any ideas about it?"

Buck stared at the jailer and shook his head.

"Imagine how it was," Masters said bleakly. "Montague half crazy because he couldn't get dope here. Trying to climb the walls, trying to beat his brains out against the bars, waking up in the night screaming for his wife. . . . We were going to ship him off to an institution in Ohio next week, but somebody wanted him dead."

Masters motioned Buck on to Rube's cell and then turned away, his footfalls muted in a rush of whispering.

Rube stood with his face pressed close to the bars, his dark eyes narrowed and shining. "I'm having lots of company lately, Buck," he said.

Buck offered his hand and felt Rube take it; and then there was a yawning chasm of futility between them that no handshake could ever span.

"I'm sorry I stayed away so long, Rube," Buck said.

"It's all right. Everything's all right." Rube turned his head and tried to focus his eyes on Masters, who had stopped at a distance in the corridor. Buck barely heard Rube's whisper, "Have you heard what Kimes did to himself?"

Buck nodded.

"It doesn't take a gun every time," Rube breathed. "It takes the long arm of the Kee-too-wah!"

Buck controlled his voice with an effort. "I didn't know you belonged to the Pins, Rube."

"I joined up about a year ago. . . . Have you found out who killed Kick Youngbird?"

"No."

Rube's smile was like a dim sun across an icy wasteland. "The Kee-too-wah will find that killer. You wait and see."

There was this gulf between them that nothing could span, and still love and loyalty could make a man try. "I searched for Kick Youngbird's Indian cronies, Rube. I wanted to talk to them, but I couldn't find them."

Rube smiled again. "Maybe you never will, but they're here in the hills like shadows. Stop looking. They wouldn't talk, even if you found them."

"That gun Minnie tried to slip in here," Buck said. "You didn't mean to try to escape, or use it on yourself?"

"Hell no!" Rube took a swift-pacing turn around his cell, but Buck knew that it wasn't fear that was riding him. George had been mistaken. Perhaps Rube had waited throughout the night for a job to be done that he had wanted done very badly, and now it was finished and the aftermath of tension was telling on him.

"Buck," Rube said aloud, "will you side me as far as the gallows?"

Buck hid the violent shock of it and its attendant sickness. "Sentences have been commuted, Rube," he said. "Men have been granted reprieves."

"They're for the weak ones," Rube said harshly. "The ones who aren't dying for a cause! The ones who cry on their bunks, and let their folks mortgage farms to pay lawyers to try to save them! . . . I can take that rope, but I'll do it better with a Caldeen close to me!"

"All right, Rube. I'll side you, if it comes to that."

"Another thing," Rube said distinctly. "I'm going to let Minnie keep coming here, as long as she wants to, but not you and George. I don't want to see you, not till the last. . . . Well, let's say it disturbs me, makes me start grabbing for hopes that I know aren't here."

"All right, Rube. If you want it that way, all right."

Rube smiled. "That's fine about George marrying Sally. She'll take that fear out of him. He'll be a genuine Caldeen then."

"I'm afraid you've spoiled him, Rube. He's . . ." Buck paused uncertainly. "I'm afraid he's weak."

"No!" Rube said almost violently. "You'll see! You never talked to the kid much after the War! You don't really know him! . . . I've pulled things out of him, Buck. I know what it's like for a kid to have everything he loves struck out from under him, for months on end! That colt he had, the one raiders took away in broad daylight, and him crying and being kicked away from the halter rope! The old muley cow he used to ride from the pasture . . . he told me how slick and warm her hide was, and how her breath smelled sweet with grass. Raiders shot her down in the lot and cut her up, and they had George roped to the fence, watching! Those same raiders took Ma off in the woods and kept her three days and nights! You never knew that, did you? And people wondered why I kept fighting! Hell! . . . Then Pa came home, crippled and

sick, and half the time there wasn't anything to eat. . . . You and me, we were fighting, but we were grown and could take the roughs."

Masters approached and said curtly, "Outside, Buck."

Rube's voice was still echoing in Buck Caldeen's mind when he left the jail and pressed through the crowd to the hack.

George had loosened the tie ropes from the hitching post, and stood by the horses looking around at the crowd.

"You hear what people are talking, Buck? Kimes killed himself."

Buck nodded and climbed to the seat. He lifted the lines and waited while George came up beside him.

"Rube may get like that, Buck! He . . . may want to kill himself!"

"Not Rube."

Buck turned the hack back to Garrison Street, reluctant to talk to his brother. There was one thought spinning inside his mind, gaining momentum. Wynona's parents had been right, intentionally or not. Rube's trouble had been tied in with Kimes Montague. . . .

But the quick hope faded in him as soon as it was born. Kimes was dead, and dead men did no talking.

He pulled up in front of Kohl Bishop's office and left George holding the lines. "I think we're due a refund, George," he said. "It shouldn't take long."

Thirteen

KOHL BISHOP PUSHED THE BROWN MANILA ENVELOPE ACROSS the desk and said evenly, "You don't have to take my word, Caldeen. There's the record of my efforts . . . and the two hundred dollars I'm giving back to you. I did my best."

Buck let the envelope rest. "You knew you couldn't swing it when you took the case. You could have told me that."

"I didn't make any promises. Two hundred is all I'll refund. My time's worth something." The lawyer ran a hand across his thinning hair and stood up. "What do you think I had to go on? Your brother is like a sullen ox in a pen."

Resignedly, Buck took the package and opened it and pulled out the money, then laid the envelope back on the desk. "I'll call it square," he said, "if you'll give me an honest answer to one question. Is there a way under the sun to save Rube from the gallows?"

"None," Bishop said flatly. "No matter what his reasons were, he shot the man in the back. He committed murder. This may sound brutal, but you might as well accept it. Your brother's just the same as dead."

Buck pocketed the money and left abruptly, his long stride spanning the wooden walk. He climbed to the seat of the hack and took the checklines, and all the time the words of the lawyer kept sinking into him like lead weights.

For once, George held his questions, and that silence, so unlike him, braced Buck's courage. They would have to face up to this, all of them . . . Buck and George and Minnie and Sally. Perhaps George was sensing that. Maybe, as Rube had insisted, George had the stuff in him.

"There are some things a man can't dodge," Brad King had said. Buck looked at the buildings along Garrison Street, and thought of this town and the power of the Federal Court that was anchored here, and knew that King had been right. A man couldn't commit murder in Indian Territory and then dodge the hangman. Not any more.

He sent the hack down the slope of the street toward the ferry, and turned once on the seat to look at the broad, high bulk of the first house on the Row. Windows in the jutting porticos threw back the afternoon sunlight, and sunlight gleamed on the gingerbread around the frames. A red-wheeled coach stopped near the paneled door and a woman got out of it and reached up to pay the driver. She was wearing crinoline and a yellow straw hat with gaudy plumes.

I wonder if Wynona is like that now, Buck thought . . . a Queen of Red Light Row?

His nerves tightened up and the sickness caught him. He faced the wide, coppery run of the river, sick clear through.

Till Petrie's place had a new coat of paint, bright yellow like the hat with the gaudy plumes. The paint made the gambling hall look squat and adobe-like—fitting, Buck thought, for this town on the river's western shore that hard-drinking men had dubbed "Little Juarez."

A fast-moving westbound stage overtook and passed them, the hooves of its four-horse hitch pounding a solid drumbeat, the wheels of the coach stirring palls of dust. Buck watched it go and thought of the hills and valleys its pathway spanned, of the deserts and mountains, the mining camps and the cattle towns. He remembered the faces of laughing, eager women. . . . Better that a man should ride, he thought, and drift with the current of irresponsibility. He had been lonely out there, but he had never known trouble such as this that weighted him now.

He glanced at his brother's still, tense face beside him and shook those thoughts away. He had roamed with abandon for too long a time. He had lost close communion with events at home which might have helped him save Rube Caldeen.

"You stay with George!" Rube had told him. "You help him get that farm back on its feet."

He must do that, Buck Caldeen thought. A man needed to sink roots deep in his homeland, fighting whatever trouble beset him. Even if Rube had to hang, time could heal the worst of wounds and a man could start all over. Maybe with

some quiet-faced, patient Indian woman, he thought: someone like Sally or Minnie.

He became aware that George was looking at him, and he averted his face, thinking bleakly that it would take a long, long time for any woman, white or Indian, to erase memories of Wynona Mapen.

He halted the hack at home in the early darkness, and unharnessed the team while George went on to the house. Later, crossing the wide front porch, he saw Sally and George together, sitting close to each other without speaking.

Sleep was a long time coming that night. Buck tossed and rolled, burdened by conflicting thoughts and crowding memories. He couldn't shut out memory of the sight of Rube's dark face pressed against the bars of the cell, nor the sound of those whispering prisoners.

He thought of Kohl Bishop, the lawyer, and suddenly remembered that refunded money. Tomorrow, Buck thought, he must take that money back to Nora Garland. . . .

The trail alongside Sunnygile Creek was dry and dusty, and the trees, once so green and verdant, stood with crisped-up leaves in the close heat of early summer. Sunnygile Creek was lower than he had ever seen it, its shoals bone-dry and the only water lying in shallow pockets around the red sand of miniature islands.

He saw the new dam then, and suddenly knew why this was.

He sent the roan up the formidable swell of it and halted, absorbing the implication of the scene that met his eyes. Grass grew rank above the banks where the water looked clean and cooling, and fat cattle browsed contentedly as far as his gaze could reach.

The sight challenged and stilled him, and made him aware of what this dam implied. It spoke of ruthless usurpation of Indian resources, of total abandonment of the principles of live-and-let-live. Anyone could have a paradise here, he thought, as long as he monopolized the water. As long as he took all the fruit of the land, and let his fellow-men perish.

The force of the thought was still strong in his mind while he rode on up Sunnygile Hollow.

He met Kern Little at the foot of the cleared slope where the road lifted sharply toward the Garland ranch house. The Texan showed open friendliness, riding his horse close and shaking hands with Buck.

"I'm glad to see you, Buck. Did you come to take that job Nora offered you a few weeks ago?"

Buck smiled wryly. "Did she tell you about that?"

"Yeah. She asked my opinion of you. I gave you a good, solid recommendation."

"Thanks, Kern. Did she ask your opinion of Nate Partain, before she hired him to ride with her?"

The Texan's lean face darkened. "No."

Buck eased himself in the saddle and gave Kern a steady, deliberate appraisal. "I'm a shade puzzled about something, Kern. Her husband has been dead quite a spell now, and you're not such a bad looking hombre. It's hard to believe that she hasn't made some advances to you . . . and I don't think you're so dumb that you haven't seen what kind of a woman she is, a long time ago."

Kern shoved his big boots hard into the stirrups, his eyes sweeping down and sideward as though searching for an answer there on the hoof-trampled earth. "I was always loyal to John Garland," he said. "John raised me from an orphan after Comanches murdered my folks. . . . Yeah, I know what kind of woman she is. I knew it soon as John married her, and had to tell her off plenty of times right after the wedding. John was too old for her. She's his second wife."

Buck nodded. "How did she ever get involved with a man like Nate Partain?"

"The Partains were our neighbors in Texas," Kern answered. "Nate has been hanging around for a long time. I never said it to anyone else, but I know he's the cause of the Partains moving here. Nate wanted to follow Nora."

"Didn't John Garland ever get suspicious?"

"I don't know. I doubt it. He married Nora in Kansas City, and her ways were so different from those of an ordinary ranch woman. John seemed to think everything Nora did was all right."

"She gave me the idea not long ago that she was through with Nate," Buck said. "Did it last?"

"No. He's up there at the house right now, after money to buy more whiskey, I guess. He had a fuss with his folks and wants to start working for us again."

"You going to hire him?"

"Not me. Nora might. We've lost several riders lately, and need hands pretty bad."

"Why are you losing riders?"

Kern shrugged. "Too many Indians snooping around, for

one thing. Young bucks who shoot our steers every now and then, and cut them up for beef. They do it openly. One day we braced them and protested, but they stood with their rifles ready and told us they're going to kill a steer for every deer that has left the hills on account of fires and lack of water. I've kept these things from Nora, or tried to, but some of our best cowhands have gone back home to Texas."

Buck said reflectively, "This must have started while I was away in the mountains."

"Yeah. Mostly during the last two weeks. We're watched constantly, Buck, and we seldom see the Indians that are watching us. It's a hell of a feeling. Those young full-bloods that used to ride with Kick Youngbird have abandoned horses and started scouting around on foot. I was never used to timbered country. I've been used to seeing things far and wide. I feel hemmed in." The Texan paused and looked at Buck steadily. "If you'd rather side me than Nora, I'll hire you, here and now."

Buck shook his head. "I just rode over to pay the widow some of the money I borrowed. If Nate's there, though, I'll wait."

"Don't tell me you're afraid of Nate Partain?"

"No. But I've had to hit him twice when he crossed me. He tried to throw a gun at me in Longtown, night before last. If he ever tries that again, I might kill him."

Kern's eyes narrowed perceptibly. "I'd say go ahead and do it, if this wasn't Indian Territory. They don't hang people in Texas for shooting in self-defense." The foreman lifted reins and was ready to ride. "Nate doesn't tarry long lately, especially when he wants a drink. He should be gone by now. Ride on up."

Buck watched the Texan ride out down the course of Sunnygile Creek and vanish in a copse of timber. For a moment Buck sat his saddle in indecision, then sent the roan up the steep road toward the ranch house.

He reached the level benchland and halted again, seeing Nate Partain just mounting near the front yard gate. Half concealed by the first trees of the cedar-lined driveway, Buck watched Nate heave himself erratically to the saddle and lift his hat in a mock salute to the widow.

She stood at the edge of the porch, her bare arms crossed against the front of a low-cut, loose-fitting dress. She said something to Nate, but her words were indistinguishable from

this distance. Nate answered with a brittle laugh, and then set spurs to his horse and sent it lunging along the driveway.

Buck pulled aside, watching Nate pass swiftly; then he rode on and halted at the gate.

Nora Garland stood looking at him, uncrossing her arms and locking her hands primly against her waist. Small dark flecks of anger still lived in her eyes, but she was a strong-willed woman and she was forcing that anger aside. She came down the steps of the porch and along the flagstone walk to meet Buck. He watched her, slightly uneasy and reluctant to dismount.

"Goodness, Buck," she said, "it's been so long! Whatever on earth has kept you?"

"I've been away on a long trip, Mrs. Garland."

Surprisingly, she didn't ask him to dismount. "Your horse looks fresh. Are you just now returning?"

"No. I stayed at home last night."

"Good!" she said. "Then you aren't tired out." She looked about her eagerly, her glance fastening upon an aged man standing in the hallway of the barn. "Hosie, saddle my horse! Hurry!"

The old man nodded meekly and turned into the shadows of the barn.

"I want to show you around the ranch, Buck," the widow said. "I want you to see what we've accomplished here during the last month." Her slender, long-fingered hands moved up to the bare flesh above her low-cut dress, and she laughed softly. "It's about time you found out what it's like to ride with me."

Buck said mildly, "This is mostly a business visit, Mrs. Garland." He reached to his hip pocket and drew out the folded bills. "I came to pay back two hundred dollars of that money I borrowed from you."

She looked at him sharply, her face going tense. "That was a gift," she said.

Buck shook his head and offered the money toward her. "I told you I didn't want a gift, Mrs. Garland."

Her face changed again, caught up in badly-timed piquancy. "Call me Nora," she said chidingly, "and put that money back in your pocket. I won't have it. Hear me?"

Buck looked at her, feeling a rash urge to throw the money at her feet. "You can't buy me," he said curtly. "I think you ought to know that."

Her look of childlike hurt angered him, wholly because he

knew it was feigned. She turned so that her thin, shrewish face was slightly in profile and looked candidly up at him.

"You're a strange kind of man, Buck," she said. "Perhaps that's why you intrigue me."

He said evenly, "I'm not like Nate Partain."

She lifted her head quickly. "So you watched him leave here?" She smiled. "Buck, I actually believe you're jealous!"

There was a sharp reply on the tip of his tongue, but he held it and sat his saddle looking at her. He felt again that faint compassion for her. How could he absorb that look on her face and tell her that he was not jealous of her, that she meant nothing at all to him? How could a man do that to a woman?

"When Hosie brings my horse," she said. "We'll let him witness the end of your indebtedness to me. Won't you do that, Buck? Accept the money as a gift, the way I want it to be?"

He said firmly, "I didn't come to take that job, Nora."

She laughed again. "I don't think I ever quite expected you to."

Buck Caldeen forced a smile and shrugged off a brief feeling of self-condemnation. "Then we understand each other, Nora," he said.

"I'm afraid we do." She looked down at the fragile buckskin sandals she was wearing. "Buck, will these shoes do to ride in? I hate to take time to change."

"Do you call those shoes?"

She laughed. "An Indian woman made them for me. They're so soft, so cool . . ." She came through the gate and waited until the old man brought her horse. "Hosie," she said crisply, "shake hands with Buck Caldeen. You remember his name and his face. He borrowed money from me recently, but now he owes me nothing. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Hosie said. He shook hands with Buck, turned and assisted Nora to the woman's sidesaddle, and then stood and watched them leave.

"Let's go to the new dam first, Buck," the widow said. "Then we'll ride up the creek and I'll show you our finest pasture."

She rode with conscious decorum, her small feet in the new sandals bobbing below her skirt. They reached the dam and rode across it, and all the while she talked animatedly of her growing love for the Low Gap country and of her plans for improving the ranch. Buck listened without comment, until

at last, obviously piqued, she asked, "Am I annoying you, Buck? Don't you sense what a great thing I'm doing here in this wilderness?"

"That might be a matter of opinion, Nora," he answered. "Down below here, there soon won't be enough water to wet the tongue of a deer."

Her face lifted determinedly. "I have a long-time lease on this land, secured through legal channels. What I do with it is my business. You aren't enough Indian for what I'm going to say to apply to you . . . but these incompetent full-bloods are lazy, unclean."

"Not all of them," Buck said defensively. "Every race is burdened with some lazy, unclean people. The opinions I formed during five years of travel have changed considerably lately. I came back with the idea that the Cherokees needed to improve their lot, but the more I ride these hills, the more I can understand an Indian's love for his last stronghold where game is plentiful and the streams full of fish. One ranch like yours won't ruin this country; but what happens when a hundred ranchers move here and start cutting the timber and damming up the streams? Indians with no means of livelihood will be forced to beg the white men for food and clothing."

"Oh, Buck, let's not argue things like that," she said. She stopped her horse and stretched her arms languidly over her head. "It's such a beautiful day! So warm and enticing! I want to ride and ride . . . or just find a cool spot in the forest and relax and talk. Shall we?"

His slow glance moved down from the flesh of her throat to the curving arches of her feet under the straps of the buckskin sandals. Tiny blue veins were visible there, visibly throbbing. Buck Caldeen's face didn't change expression, but there was this growing anticipation in him, born of the flesh and blood of man.

"That cool spot sounds all right," he said.

She laughed and turned her horse under the green overhang of the red-oaks, taking the narrow trail up the course of the creek. Buck followed, watching her duck under the low-hanging branches occasionally, and seeing the challenge in her eyes as she often looked back at him. She halted at last and threw a hand out eloquently. Buck reined up beside her and saw the horn-shaped run of sand, and the fringe of willows, and beyond the willows, the dark blue water of the slough.

He dismounted and tied the roan securely, conscious that she was waiting in her saddle, looking at him. He turned then

and went to her and lifted her down lightly. She came against him when her feet touched the sand, and he held her briefly; then he released her when she lifted her face for his kiss. Her face had no appeal for him; he wouldn't mislead her. He led her horse to a stout willow and tied it, and when he turned back to her, she was sitting down on the sand.

"Take off my sandals, Buck," she said. "Isn't this nice?"

Buck knelt and lifted her right foot deftly, untying the thongs of the sandal and taking it off. He was reaching for the other when she writhed around violently and made a small startled sound; and he came up, wheeling, and saw the snake.

It was an old spreading adder, its mottled head flattened, its tongue sticking out and its eyes shining like tiny beads in the patch of sunlight. It had obviously just slid from a brush-drift, and had stopped, coiling on the gleaming sand.

Buck reached for his gun, but the voice of the widow stopped him.

"Oh, no, Buck! Don't shoot it!"

He stared down at her. "Why not?"

"Buck, you know better than that." Her eyes reproached him. "Someone might hear the shot."

She had taken off her other sandal herself, and her feet moved apart, digging a soft, shallow channel in the sand. Buck looked at her and knew that any preliminary gestures would be a waste of time. He stooped and lifted her and carried her into the seclusion of the willows.

Behind them near the brush drift, the snake coiled again, its flat head lifting and its tongue writhing out and in through the hot, tight constriction of its mouth.

Fourteen

EVEN TIME COULDN'T HEAL ALL WOUNDS, BUCK CALDEEN thought, but hard work could bring reprieves from worry. He started clearing land on Little Lee's Creek, expanding the Caldeen farm on north toward the foot of Big Round Mountain. Tag-ends of an old dream began to filter again through his mind, and out of that elusive dream emerged his new and strong philosophy.

A man could wage constant warfare to gain his ends, but if he could not gain them, he must accept defeat with some portion of resignation, even if Rube must hang. Even, also, if he could never entirely forget Wynona.

He found some peace in watching George's transition from uncertain youth to confident manhood under the guidance of his simple young Indian wife. Sally bloomed like a dusky rose in the forest, and walked softly, already caught with child. Buck could understand the passionate desire Rube had had for George and Sally to marry, and he knew that Rube's insight had been greater than his own. George often talked sadly of Rube's plight, but it was obvious that some of his hurt had dwindled, and that he was becoming absorbed and strengthened in his new life with the Indian girl.

Buck had never gone to see Nora Garland again, but in less than a month she had come to him.

He leaned on his ax in the early Autumn and remembered that day. . . . She had ridden into the clearing at sunset, wearing a rose-studded hat and high-topped shoes and a dress as sheer as gossamer. Her greeting had been reserved, her stance in the saddle queenly.

"I'm becoming impatient, Buck," she had said. "Why haven't you come to see me?"

"I've been busy."

The frustration that had built inside her had suddenly showed on her shrewish face. "Is that the only answer you have for me, Buck?"

"It's the only one I care to give."

"Then there are other reasons?"

"Why press me, Mrs. Garland? I played a game with you once, but it's over, finished."

"Help me down, Buck! I want to talk with you!"

"It's late. I'm fixing to go in for supper."

"No!" Her eyes had held a brazen warning. "You have some education, Buck. Didn't you ever learn the phrase: 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'?"

"Let's break this off, Mrs. Garland. I'm not impressed."

"Buck, you're the only man I've ever really wanted!"

He had thought coldly, Your body may have that craving, but not your heart. Strange, but he had no longer even felt compassion for her. The very sight of her had repelled him. He hadn't bothered to tell her that during the last month he had abandoned the old way of life for good; that George was trying to make a new life with Sally, that the clearing was going well, that resignation and a gradual return of his love for the hills had changed his thinking, and that there was no room for cheapness now.

He had shouldered his ax and left her. He had not seen her since.

But now he leaned on his ax and remembered, and thought again how much difference there was in women. The afternoon sun was growing warm on his back and the breeze carried the pleasant smell of his brush fires. The land under his feet was breathing, waiting for the touch of the plow. He thought with a surge of longing, More than five years ago, I stood in another clearing along this creek and built a dream. . . .

He straightened up suddenly, his eyes catching a flash of brighter color through the autumn-tinted trees. He released the handle of his ax and let it fall, conscious of the shocked feeling that his thoughts of her had conjured her out of the elements about him. He saw Wynona, coming out of the fringe of the clearing, walking straight toward him. Her face was lifted and clearly distinct in the rays of the slanting sunlight.

He looked at her and thought with a growing desperation. She must have been the one I saw on the Row that day! I wasn't close enough to recognize her!

Wynona was wearing crinoline, and a bright yellow hat with a plume. There wasn't any hesitancy about her. He remembered painfully that there had never been reluctance in her.

"Hello, Buck," she called. "Mind if I visit?"

He touched his hat briefly and spoke to her. Then, looking through the trees beyond the clearing, he saw a portion of a horse and buggy, halted on the old creek road.

"I came out to see my parents, Buck," she said. She sat on a fallen hickory. "Will Payne told me the news when I stopped in Longtown, so I decided to see you, too."

"I'm glad you came to see your folks, Wynona," he said. "I think they've been worried that you never would." Then something in the way she looked at him got across to him. "What news?" he asked.

"The news about you and Nora Garland."

He had time for a fleeting touch of anger at the revolting thought that Wynona should mention that. "What news?" he repeated curtly.

Wynona gave him a cool, steady appraisal, and it struck him again how strange it was that her dark eyes could hold such light.

"Maybe it's just gossip, then," she said. "At least that's what I hope. . . . Buck, you couldn't ever marry a woman like her, could you?"

He said hoarsely, "Who's talking that stuff, anyhow?"

"From what Will said, lots of people are talking it," she answered. "I couldn't really believe it, though."

Buck looked at her yellow hat with its tall plume waving and felt the rise of hot, irrelevant anger. He knew it was irrelevant, futile, but it was there just the same, born of the pride that was in him.

"It isn't true," he said. "But even if it were, what would it mean to you?"

He hadn't meant to say it so savagely, but he had said it, and he watched its brutal shock go through her and saw her stand.

"I guess it would mean nothing, Buck. Nothing at all. I shouldn't have come here." But she didn't go. She faced him, and the color that had surged into her throat was draining down. She was pale. "I won't leave until I tell you why I had to see you, if you'll listen."

"I'm listening now."

"You know, of course, that Kimes is dead. I'm . . . no longer encumbered."

He nodded, and suddenly into his mind flashed the picture the jailer's words had painted . . . Kimes trying to climb the walls, Kimes screaming for his wife in the night. . . .

"Is that all you came to tell me?" Buck asked.

"No."

"Haven't you married Till Petrie yet?"

Her lips drew firm, their fullness fading against the paleness of her face. "You've talked to Till? What did he tell you?"

"He told me enough. More than I wanted to know."

"He asked me to marry him. But this is what I came to tell you. I haven't given him my answer yet."

"You'd better give it to him," Buck Caldeen said. "He might change his mind."

"Buck . . ."

"He'll make you an honest living! You marry him, before you break your mother's heart! Before your folks find out you've turned into a—"

"Turned into a . . . what?"

Buck felt the cold sweat breaking out on his brow. He wiped at it with the back of his hand, feeling the terrible sensation that it was filling his eyes, shutting out his vision. The trees around the clearing were spinning in on him, locking him in a world without hope, without horizons.

He fought out of that dark world desperately and saw her still standing there. He went toward her.

"I'm sorry I said that, Wynona. Forgive me."

"Don't touch me, Buck! Oh, I hate you! I've humbled myself, almost begged you! . . . Oh, I hate you!"

He stopped and watched her turn away from him, stumbling, almost running. She crossed the clearing, hurrying faster, her small shoes lifting puffs of cloying blackness where Buck had burned the brush. She reached the trees and turned once to look at him, and when she faced ahead again a dangling prong of grapevine knocked off her hat. She kept going, leaving the hat where it had fallen, and presently he saw her climbing to the seat of the buggy and snatching at the lines.

He would remember her always like that, Buck Caldeen thought, a girl in crinoline, hatless, running toward a buggy through the trees. . . .

He crossed the clearing and picked up the hat holding it tenderly. The plume was broken; just a mocking, tiny, lifeless

stem. He held the hat against his strong chest, listening to the dwindling sound of hoof-beats, and smelling the faint perfume that still clung to the hat. The broken plume mocked him, but the perfume mocked him in a different way. It brought up the old inward sickness and frustration and the anger that things should be as they were.

How many men had touched her? How many men had smelled this same perfume? Those questions blasted at his consciousness, and his pride was a living, fighting thing. He looked around at the clearing, sensing that even the tag-ends of the old dream were leaving him.

Fifteen

BUCK SWUNG HIS AX UNDER THE CLIMBING AND LOWERING sun and lost some of his loneliness in the heat of physical exertion. Only the nights were bad, consumed by fitful sleep in which he dreamed of Wynona, and by waking spells in which he struggled with thoughts of Rube.

Minnie Youngbird and her brother left the river after the first cold nights and came back and opened up the Youngbird house. She began to spend her time sewing and weaving and cooking. With an Indian woman's stoical resignation, she had at last accepted Rube's fate. She had stayed near him as long as possible, and now the essentials of life confronted her and she went about her work, uncomplaining.

Winter locked the hills and time wore on monotonously. This was the worst time of all for Buck Caldeen. For months he had wanted to go see Rube, but he was determined to respect his brother's wishes. He trapped for mink along the creek early in the season, and then moved southwest to the waters of Big Skin Bayou. He did well. He sold the pelts to Will Payne, and spent many long evenings in the store, talking to the storekeeper and to Brad King. Will never mentioned Nora Garland, and Buck decided at last that the widow must have spread the gossip herself, months ago after their ride to Sunnygile Hollow.

"Things are quiet," Brad King said once. "Trees all bare and not many Indians scouting. Kern Little told me last summer that he was about to pull stakes. There was a feeling of fear in the hills, a feeling that something was about to happen. Now it's gone."

Buck made no comment, but he remembered Rube's words about the long arm of the Kee-too-wah, and Rube's assertion that the Indians were there, like shadows.

Then spring came mild and sweet and tinged with expanding greenness. There was work again in the fields, in which Buck and George found release from tension. Some strange, elusive feeling came to Buck out of the warm earth during periods of reflective stillness . . . the feeling that Rube had been right, and that Kick Youngbird's murderer would come to light, like spilled blood on sand after a cleansing downpour.

That spring, early, Sally Caldeen had her child: a boy, smooth and dark as a chinquapin nut, with long slim feet and a mop of coarse black hair. George had known spells of despondency during the winter, but now he whistled occasionally while he plowed.

But the time for Rube's hanging was drawing close, and there were more frequent moments of silence at the Caldeen table. At last, near sundown on the eighth of April, Buck rode to the Bellefonte graveyard to pick out a spot for Rube.

The expanse of earth under the oak trees looked desolate, lonely. Fallen leaves made rough brown piles against the mounds and headstones, and stray cattle had pushed in places along the fence. Windows of the church were like staring eyes, forlorn and bleak guardians of this old burial ground in the heart of Indian country.

Buck left the roan at the sagging gate and went inside. The crude rock headstone at the graves of his parents was already covered with a thin layer of moss and lichen. His mother's mound had flattened and widened under the rose bush that Wynona had planted on the day of the funeral, and his father's grave, close beside it, was decorated with mussel shells and stones from the shoals of Lee's Creek.

There was a place beside their mother large enough for Rube. . . .

Buck drew in a rasping breath and had a moment of heartbreak and panic. He couldn't grasp it. Illness could take a man, and that was bad; it was bad to die in the stress of combat. Buck had witnessed much of that. It would be bad to die as Murch Kenton had died, with the hot, twisting sting of Rube Caldeen's bullets wrenching through his back. . . . But to pen a man up for months like a fattening shoat, and then take him out and methodically kill him . . .

Buck wheeled away and started walking toward his horse.

Some strange impelling urge drew his gaze around about him as he walked, and quite suddenly he saw the fresh mound of earth under the oak tree. He stopped. He had not heard about anyone in the hills dying recently. He went over to the new grave, his curiosity intensifying. At the head of the grave he saw a small wooden cross with burned-in lettering. He knelt and read it: JOHN H. GARLAND 1810-1876 GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN.

Buck stared at the fresh earth of the grave and felt fingers of ice clawing through him. John Garland had died more than a year ago. This grave should be settled and hard-packed from the winter's rains, and sprouting grass under the warmth of this springtime! Had someone dug down to the casket? Or had the mound merely been re-shaped?

There was reluctance in him even to touch the grave, but he had to know the answers. He started digging into the mound with his hands. As he worked the certainty grew in him, and when he looked closely beyond the grave there was no doubt left in his mind. Fresh earth of the excavation was still visible under a thin spreading of leaves that had evidently been hurriedly raked there. Someone had dug the earth out of this grave, and then had refilled it and shaped it! Why?

Buck stood up and looked about through the dusky darkness, aware of a primal sense that evil was close at hand. Had Indians, resenting the burial of a white man in this old Cherokee cemetery, removed John Garland's body? Or had some skulking ruffian of the hills searched the grave for valuables? Those questions were clamoring at Buck Caldeen's mind as he went to the roan and mounted.

He had a moment of indecision when he reached the intersection of the Longtown road. Should he notify Brad King, or go and tell Nora Garland? He made his decision and turned northward, riding fast down the slopes of the foothills and on across Polecat Creek. Full night had gathered when he rode into Sunnygile Hollow.

The Garland ranch house was darkened and quiet, but a light was on in the bunkhouse. Buck rode that way and halted. Kern Little stood uneasily in the doorway, his eyes searching the darkness; then, when Buck identified himself, the Texan came out and they had their talk.

"Where's Mrs. Garland?" Buck asked.

"She made a trip out to Texas," Kern answered.

"Did she go alone?"

"As far as I know, she did."

"Do you know why she went?"

Kern hesitated. "Well, she said she was leaving on business. But I think it was to get away from Nate for a spell."

"Is he here?"

"He's around in the hills. I don't know where. He has stopped drinking—seems to be afraid liquor will kill him—but nobody can stay around him, not even Nora."

"Why won't she have him arrested, if he's bothering her?"

"I don't know, Buck. He seems to have some kind of hold on her. Or maybe she doesn't want to hurt his parents. I just don't know. He isn't a man anyone can pity. I used to think drinking made him mean, but he's worse when he's sober—deliberately cruel, violent. His own folks have given him up. They're getting rid of their lease soon, and going back to Texas."

Buck waited a moment, then asked quietly, "Kern, was anything of value buried with John Garland?"

Kern straightened. "Why do you ask that?"

"Somebody has been tampering with John Garland's grave," Buck answered. "Yesterday, I'd say, from the looks of the dirt."

Kern Little took a quick backward step. "Hell," he said. "Why?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe Nate—"

"No!" Kern said violently. "Nate saw John laid out! There wasn't anything buried with him! Not even a watch or ring! Nate knew that." The Texan's breathing was audible. "You think the body was disturbed?"

"I don't know, Kern. The grave has been refilled, shaped neat and clean. I guess Nate wouldn't have done that, would he?"

"No!"

Kern stepped close, his lean face tight and strained in the light from the bunkhouse doorway. "Why, only day before yesterday, Nora mentioned that she ought to have a tombstone freighted out for John's grave. You reckon she went there, saw the grave had been dug out? Maybe she was scared! Maybe that's the reason she left!" He paused and reached into his pocket. "Indians are snooping around again, Buck. I found this thing stuck in the ranch house door this morning."

Kern held up his hand, gripping an object between thumb

and forefinger. Buck recognized the neatly-crossed pins of the Kee-too-wah.

"You'd better tell Brad King about that, Kern," he said. "Tell him about the grave, too."

"You think. . .?"

Buck hesitated, reluctant to give voice to the thought that was growing in him. "Maybe John Garland should never have been buried in the Bellefonte graveyard. I don't know. I've never felt that there's anything, well, insidious about the Kee-too-wah society. Many of its leaders are old settlement people, educated Indians who came here from Georgia long before the Trail of Tears. This land was given to the Indians as long as grass grows and water flows, as old Kick Youngbird said. A few incompetent Cherokees with a craving for fine horses and lots of whiskey have let their land slip away from them, but thinking Indians don't like it. I don't know what it'll lead to."

Kern said slowly, "But I take it your sympathy is all with the Indians?"

"Yes. That's one reason I wouldn't ride for you, Kern." Buck shifted his weight on the big roan horse. The squeaking of his saddle made a loud noise in the strained, waiting stillness. "My brother will have to hang for murder tomorrow. He says he killed for a cause. I'm certain that he has killed more than once, but I don't know the exact reasons. Maybe, deep down, I've been reluctant to pry too deep. Maybe I took the long way round, dreading to face the answers. Tomorrow, Rube will give me his reasons for committing murder. I won't know until then, but I think the cause he is going to die for is the cause of the Indians. Indians who were wronged, or maybe only one Indian who was close to our family. I'm telling you this for what it's worth, but I don't want you to get panicked. For a long time, I've had the feeling that Brad King knows much more than he has told any man. You go see him, tonight."

"I'll do that, Buck," Kern said. He offered his hand and Buck took it. Kern laughed softly, and there was warmth in the sound. "Whatever happens, Buck," he said, "remember that I think you're as solid as the best Texan I ever met!"

"Thanks, Kern. I'll return that. I never met a Texan I liked better than you, right from the first jump."

The warmth of their brief friendship was still alive in Buck when he rode out of the dark timbered mouth of Sunnygile

Hollow and struck the road leading home. It didn't fade in him until he saw the lights of the house, and George and Sally waiting for him in the doorway. Then he thought with a wrenching hurt, Tomorrow, I have to go side Rube. . . .

Sixteen

IT WAS A LONG WALK FROM HARE'S LIVERY ON TEXAS ROAD to the Fort Smith Federal Jail. Buck put up the roan and made that walk deliberately in an effort to quell his growing strain. He walked alone, a strong, dark man, isolated from the people about him by the black thoughts that dogged his footsteps. He was gunless. George had persuaded him to leave his gun at home.

"How can you know what you'll be thinking by the time you get there, Buck? I don't want you to get into any trouble. If you'll let me go . . ."

"No!"

"I can stand up to it, Buck! Maybe I couldn't have stood it once, but now . . ."

"You stay with Sally and the baby, George. I think Rube would want you to."

"How do you know you won't get panicky and try to help Rube make a break? Rube didn't think he would try anything, either, but he made a wild stab for Brad King's gun when they got to the ferry. Brad had to knock him cold."

Buck had never heard that, and the thought of it had added to his mounting stress; but now as he neared the jail and sensed the feeling of excitement in the gathering crowd, he was glad that he had forced George to stay at home. He pressed through a group of marshals in the jailer's quarters and confronted Masters at the desk.

"You'll have to submit to search, Buck," Masters said. "You'll have an hour with Rube, if you want it. I'll lock you in with him. A man from Longtown—Will Payne by name—

sent a farmer with a light spring wagon. The coffin is on it."

"I intended to hire a wagon at the livery," Buck said. "I intended to buy the coffin. I never said anything about it to Will, but that's like him."

"He sent word that he didn't want to see the hanging, but that he and his wife would"—Masters dropped his head—"be praying for both of you. You might tell Rube that, if you want to."

"I'll tell him."

Masters lifted his head and there was a grayness about his cheekbones. "Payne also sent word that Deputy Marshal King couldn't be here. He had intended to be here, but something detained him."

"That's all right," Buck said, remembering John Garland's grave.

"We have Rube isolated now," Masters said. "You'll have absolute privacy. Anything you want to say . . ."

Buck said impatiently, "All right! Search me and take me to him!"

Masters flushed and stood up and made a brief motion for assistance from one of the marshals. They searched Buck's trousers, shirt, hat and underclothing, and then had him pull off his boots and socks. Buck had to grit his teeth to control pent-up violence. A doomed man had no chance, he thought, even for the blessed crutch of dope. . . .

He followed Masters down the corridor, walking slowly. Whatever mood Rube was in, he thought, he had to match it or stand up to it without breaking.

Masters stopped, and the upthrust butt of the gun on his hip drew all of Buck Caldeen's attention. Masters got still, watching Buck, and then his hands moved deftly and the cell door opened. The jailer side-stepped and Buck went through. He heard the door click shut behind him, and the sound of the jailer's retreating footsteps; then he looked across the cell and there was Rube.

Rube wasn't standing. He was sitting on the hard edge of the bunk against the opposite wall, but there was a half-crouch about his posture, like that of an animal getting set to jump. His eyes were like hack-sawn rings from a black gun muzzle, dark and yet shining metallically, catching what light there was.

Rube offered his hand without standing. "I've been expecting you, Buck. Sit down."

Buck gripped his brother's hand and then sat down beside

him. Rube laughed, and there was unmistakable humor in it.

"I've been listening to lots of saw and hammer work outside," he said. "Somebody must be building something."

Just let me match it, Buck thought silently. "The town's growing fast, Rube," he said aloud.

"Yeah. . . . I wonder why they have to repair that damned gibbet, every time they hang a man?"

"Maybe they've had some rough men up there, Rube."

Rube laughed again. "And big ones, huh? Like me."

"I talked George out of coming here, Rube," Buck said.

"Good. How is he?"

"Fine. He isn't scared of anything now. He'd fight his weight in catamounts if someone bothered Sally or the kid."

"Is he working? Plowing, clearing, building up the farm?"

"From daylight till dark, Rube."

Rube pulled his breath in deep and straightened, and ran his strong hands along his thighs. "I knew he needed Sally Youngbird. What he has is worth dying for."

"You said you'd tell me, Rube. Remember? Why you killed Murch Kenton."

"Yeah . . . I'll tell you on one condition. If you'll promise never to expose the things I say to a living soul. No one. Understand me?"

"You have my promise, Rube."

"All right. First, though, there's something I want to lay out for you, if it hasn't already struck you. Have you ever thought about the pride of the Caldeen men—Pa, and me, and you and George? Have you stopped to think about how all of us look on our women? No? All right. You listen . . . Pa got some wounds in the War, but they weren't what killed him. He died because the heart went out of him when he found out that other men had been to Ma. . . . Wait! It didn't make any difference that she was forced to the woods, abused, maybe beaten! Pa couldn't forget it. His galling pride wouldn't let him. It ate his insides out like a cancer, and I think Ma knew what was wrong with him when he died."

Rube's head was up, his eyes fastened on the bars of the close steel cage. Buck waited, letting his brother's last words etch themselves on his mind and memory.

"Take me," Rube said, "and then you. . . . I married a woman here in Fort Smith. I thought she was a good woman —she was a good woman—but I found out after we married that she'd slipped up once with a soldier, a boy she loved before the war. He was killed at Pea Ridge. I don't know why

she ever told me. Maybe because she loved me enough to want to clear her conscience. Maybe she felt guilty, hiding that. It ruined us. I loved her. I still love her, more than I love Minnie, but after that I couldn't ever treat her right. Why? Hell, because of this damnable Caldeen pride! And now let's take you. You loved Wynona Mapen. Maybe you still care for her. But you thought she was getting too thick with Kimes Montague, so after that she couldn't say anything to you, couldn't even be with you. That Caldeen pride! You pulled out and wasted five years. You let Kimes have her—and you wouldn't even have her when she tried to throw herself at you, after you got back!"

"You've learned a lot, Rube," Buck said. "I'm wondering how."

"Wynona has been here to see me. Lots of times. I guess she had to talk to someone. She has had a hell of a life. Do you know what old Ward caught Kimes Montague doing to a twelve-year-old Indian girl?"

"No."

An oath ripped out of Rube. "She was an orphan kid, living with her grandmother, an old crone who had a cabin back in Sally Bull Hollow. Both the girl's parents had died with consumption. The kid couldn't speak a word of English, and I doubt if she'd ever tasted candy or had a sweet-flavored drink in her life. . . . Kimes fed the girl on sweet, doped red wine, and God only knows how he mistreated her! I guess she wasn't the first one, but old Ward Mapen happened to catch him that time. When Ward found them the kid was bleeding and crying, and Kimes was trying to lead her down to the creek!"

Speechless, Buck stared up at Rube, watching the hell-raking fury take shape on the doomed man's face.

"No, he wasn't arrested for that! I guess Wynona wanted to kill him, to do anything to him, but her mother, she was afraid of the disgrace it'd bring to the Mapen family if it ever leaked out, because Wynona was married to Kimes! It was disgrace enough, Wynona's mother thought, just to have Kimes jailed for fooling with dope. Wynona told me that—Kick Youngbird found it out after I was put in jail, and he told me about it, and I knew then that Kimes had to die! That gun I wanted slipped in here—I aimed to shoot Kimes, the first time I caught the jailer leading him past my cell, but when that didn't work I made other plans. I had some help slipping that pin to Montague, but, by God, I'm taking the

credit for doing him in! I knew I couldn't hang but once, even if I killed a dozen!" Rube stopped and clamped his lips, his breath wheezing in and out through his nostrils. "I had to kill him for another reason, too. Because I was afraid he knew what happened to Sally."

Buck's own voice seemed to come from a great distance. "What happened to Sally, Rube?"

Rube's smile was like a garish, death's-head smirk. "Almost the same thing that happened to the kid, only Sally was grown and she could take Murch Kenton!"

"Rube, do you know what you're saying! Is that the truth?"

"I'll be a dead man in less than an hour, Buck," Rube said. "I wouldn't be lying to you!"

"But Sally is George's wife now! Our own brother . . ."

"There you go! That Caldeen pride again, pushing up on George's account, working every which way from Sunday! Shut up, and let me talk! Kenton hated the Indians, and he'd been used to taking girls and squaws where he found them among the ignorant tribes on the plains. When he got to the Low Gaps he found things different, but Kimes taught him lots of tricks. God only knows how he got to be an Indian agent, but he did, and he even gained the confidence of Kick Youngbird at first. He bragged to Kick about Sally's intelligence, and talked of how he'd like to help her go to some mission school. One day when old Kick and Minnie had gone to Longtown after groceries, Kenton brought sandwiches and stuff and took Sally on a picnic. They were gone so long I got suspicious. I quit work and trailed them. . . . Hell! He was old enough to be her father, but he was sharp, and he pulled a trick that Kimes had taught him. Red wine, doped with Spanish fly! I found Sally crying in the woods where Kenton had left her. She was half dead from shock, half crazy. I trailed and caught Kenton, aiming to throw a gun on him and take him to a U.S. Marshal. . . ."

Rube clenched his fists and then opened them and began popping the knuckles of his fingers. "Do you know what Kenton did when I leveled on him and told him I was going to have him jailed? He laughed in my face and asked me where I thought I could find a court that would prosecute him for having relations with a Cherokee whore! No man will ever know what that did to me, Buck! I thought of how George and Sally cared about each other. I remembered all the nice things George had told me about her, and about how he

aimed to marry her some day, though he had never just come right out and asked her. I thought of the pride of the Caldeens, and remembered how Pa had stopped wanting to live, and I guess I went kill-crazy. I knew that Kenton was right, that he'd go scot-free and maybe tell around what he'd done to Sally. I couldn't let him do that. I told him I was going to kill him and leave his body to rot for the buzzards.

"He didn't believe it at first, not until I pulled back the hammer and leveled on his dirty heart! I intended to make it quick, a heart shot, an execution, but then he wheeled and started running and I sent every slug in my pistol through his back. I left him and went back and took Sally to the creek. I doused her and slapped her face till she got her senses back, and then I told her what I'd done, and told her she'd never have a life with George if she ever told it as long as she lived. Not even old Kick, or Minnie, or anyone! I knew if Kenton had caught her up it would come out, but I waited more than a month, and when Sally came and told me she wasn't with child, I knew everything would be all right. George wouldn't know. They could marry."

Buck stood up. "Rube, you wouldn't have got a death sentence if you had told the court that story!"

"Oh, yes I would have! I knew it! Kenton was a Government man, and Sally just a simple young Indian girl. . . . Don't think I haven't had moments, even hours, of weakness here in jail before my trial! But even if I had told the story, it wouldn't have saved me, and Sally would have been brought here to testify, and everything would have come out. George would have known, then, and he's a Caldeen, packing the same kind of pride and jealously the rest of us pack where our women are concerned. It wouldn't have saved me, anyhow, and George's life would have been ruined."

"How was Kimes Montague involved in this?"

"That doped wine business. I didn't know about that for a while, not about Kimes, but when I found it out I figured he might have known that Kenton was going to do that to Sally. He was wild here, I know, crazy for dope, but I was afraid there'd be a time when he might tell someone the reason I killed Kenton, and the protection I was trying to give Sally would all be lost. I knew Kimes had to die. Anyone who knew that secret, they had to die."

"How about Nate Partain?"

Rube smiled tightly. "I never wanted to kill a man without good reason. Nate was lying. I knew it. No one saw me shoot

Kenton. Nate didn't mention the killing until after Kenton's body was found, and then he either just wanted to be in the limelight, or was egged on to help prosecute me, maybe by Mrs. Garland. She had it in for me because I was hard against Indians leasing their land to cattlemen."

"What if you're wrong, though, Rube? What if Nate really was there, hiding in the brush? What if he starts talking?"

Rube got up and took a turn around the cell, pausing once near the door to listen. When he faced Buck again his eyes were like probing gimlets. "If I'm wrong about Nate," he said, "then I'm going to hell for nothing! You'll be in the hills. You keep close tabs on him. I want you to promise you'll kill him, if he ever breathes a word about Sally and Kenton. If he ever gives you any reason to believe that he knows . . ."

"I can't make a promise like that, Rube. I'll run him out of the country, though. I'll do that."

Rube's face got still, and then he relaxed and shrugged. "Stop thinking about it. It's just like I said. I haven't lived in the woods most of my life for nothing. No one was there. I know it."

Buck watched the hard light die out of his brother's glance. "Rube, Will Payne sent word that he and his wife would be praying for you. I thought you'd like to know that."

"Yeah. Good old Will! Buck, you're taking this hard. I can tell it, but I want to let you in on how I feel. I had a good life when I was young. Plenty to eat and wear, a good school to go to, fine horses to ride and work to make me strong. I fought a good fight in the War, and I've had two good women. Maybe if I was leaving children of my own, I wouldn't make this sacrifice for George and Sally, but something happened to me when a sawbones dug a Minie ball out of my crotch after a skirmish in Missouri. I haven't been a whole man since. But the way things are, George can keep the Caldeen name going on, and you can too, if you will." Rube sat down.

Buck sat down beside him without answering.

"I've had a pretty good life, considering," Rube went on. "And as for walking out and dying—why, hell, that'll be easy, compared to the death I've already died here in this stinking jail! A man without imagination, you jail him, and that's all there is to it. He doesn't imagine beyond that. He's just in jail. Then when he gets out to die it gets to him, and maybe he goes frantic, starts crying and screaming. I know when I walk

out there, it won't be as bad as I've already imagined. It was always that way before a battle, or before I hopped on a fast freight train in Tennessee, coming home; always that way before I climbed a bucking horse, or before I met a man I knew I was going to try to lick with my fists. You understand what I mean?"

"I understand, Rube. I'm a lot that way too."

"I wish you'd understand that about the Caldeen pride, too, Buck. I don't mean I'm down on the men of the family. A man without faults . . . well, he's like a creek or river with high, straight banks and the shoals all removed and no place for the cranes to drink. He's deep, maybe, but he isn't very interesting after the first few looks. But you take a strong man with faults, and maybe remove some of the uglier ones or let understanding bury them so deep they never show, then you have something. You think about that."

"I'll do that, Rube."

Footsteps sounded in the corridor. Buck chilled and had an almost overpowering urge to look at his watch. He quelled that urge and waited, and presently Masters stopped just outside.

"Another man wants to talk with you, Rube," Masters said. "If you're willing. He's waiting out front. Says his name's Till Petrie."

Rube's dark face lighted. "Ol' Till," he said. "Sure. Tell him—tell him to join us outside, will you? Is that all right?"

"Whatever you say." The jailer started to go, then stopped and turned back. "You'll be shackled, Rube, and heavily guarded, but nobody will touch you, if you keep walking. You'll have plenty of time for any last words, to the crowd or the minister, after . . ."

Rube's voice, slower than Buck had ever heard it, moved in on the jailer's talk.

"Can a man . . . ah . . . can a man see across into Cherokee Nation, from up there?"

"Yes."

Rube dipped his head. "I'm ready any time, Masters. I'd rather not drag this out."

Seventeen

RUBE'S SHACKLES WERE HEAVY AND AWKWARD, BUT HE MOVED down the length of the corridor without breaking the procession's slow, steady pace. Buck walked beside him, seeing the dark-clothed minister growing blurred in his vision, and hearing the close breathing of the jail guards just behind.

Buck fought down his panic with an iron-clamped resolve, knowing beyond the shadow of a doubt that Rube wouldn't weaken now. The corridor door opened and Till Petrie stood there, hatless and dressed in a dark serge suit and a white shirt with a black string tie. He moved in on the other side of Rube, quietly, his eyes steady and cool and his face wearing its gambler's mask.

Rube kept moving, his eyes set straight ahead. "Good to see you, Till. How's business?"

"Seven. Eleven. Aces back to back."

Buck glanced sideward at Rube's face and saw it caught in a faint, elusive smiling.

Sunlight hit Rube like an impact. His face lifted and he almost stopped. Then suddenly he did stop, stone still.

"Minnie," he said softly. "I told you not to come."

She pushed from the crowd and came straight toward him. "Keep moving!" a guard said, low but distinctly. Rube stood still.

"I go," Minnie said. "Rube, I go far as I can."

Till stepped back and Minnie took his place, reaching to grasp Rube's hand. The procession moved on toward the gallows stand, through the silence and the avidly curious stares of the crowd.

There was a moment of confusion at the foot of the steps, when Rube stopped and grasped Minnie's hand with both his own, and then raised them, motioning her from him. She made a whimpering sound and stepped back from him and Rube went on up the steps.

Buck stopped, barely conscious that Till had moved up beside him. The gibbet and the crowd around it; the old barracks wall and the jail and the town were like pictures seen through smoke. And out of that haze at last, dominating it and eliminating it, was Rube Caldeen, standing with crossed arms on the trap door, looking across the river toward the hills of the Cherokee Nation.

In spite of the grief that was tearing the soul out of him, Buck felt a flash of pride. This moment, he knew, was the crowning one of his brother's life. Rube was dying for a cause he believed in, and during these last moments his face revealed his triumph.

If I could only leave him now, Buck thought, I could remember him that way . . . my brother, big and triumphant, standing on the threshold of death looking to the hills he loves. . . .

But Rube wasn't going to make a farewell speech. Things moved swiftly. The binding of his arms behind him. The binding of ankles and knees. The black mask that shut out life and victory. The rope . . .

The rasp of the trap-door pin was like a wedge, ice cold, driving into Buck's vitals. He flinched and saw Rube drop.

There was that one split-instant when life was there, plunging feet-first earthward; then the audible snap, and Rube's body stopping like the weight at the end of a plumb line, slowly turning, in plain sight under the platform.

Then Buck saw the spurt of blood go up the rope and run down again, spreading darkly red against Rube's shirt front. A frenzied cry went through the crowd. People started moving, surging against each other. The black mask was pulling upward. Red tendons showed.

My God! Buck thought. Too long! Too far! The weight of Rube's big body had literally torn his head from his shoulders! In a moment his body would fall.

There was a frenzied second when Buck's mind was locked, paralyzed. He couldn't move. He saw the two marshals climbing over the braces of the gibbet stand, rushing toward Rube's body. They reached the body and their hands went out. Buck Caldeen ran amuck.

He was aware that Till Petrie's hands were on his arms, pulling at him, but Till's urgent voice was lost in the noise of the crowd. Savagely, he wheeled and lashed out at Till, and he felt the sodden, hurting impact of his fist against Till's jaw. He was loose and running then, fighting blindly to reach Rube's body while the marshals closed in on him. He fought them with a blind, outraged fury until the butt of a gun smacked against his skull and there was a flash of light and then darkness.

He came up fast from his backward fall and saw the huddle of spinning faces. At last he recognized Till.

"Stop it" Till said. "Back up and let me have him! Can't you see what that did to him?"

With Till helping him, Buck gained his feet.

The fury was gone, and now there was only this sickness and shaking; a palpable sickness that impelled him to retch and emit it there on the trampled earth. Till was pulling him away, and he wanted to go. He tried to, in a lurching, staggering way, still dazed from the impact of the marshal's pistol. Presently he felt the hard cobbles of the street under his boots.

"We'll get you a drink, Buck," Till said. "Come on now. You need a good fast drink."

The interior of the saloon was like a dark cavern after the glare of the sunlight. He felt a stool against the front of his legs and Till's strong hands heaving him up. He sat on the stool, bracing himself against the bar while his senses cleared. He heard Till order whiskey.

Gradually, there was a clearness about him, a vividness and the return of the horror. He tilted the glass and felt the whiskey burn him. It churned in him, but he held it down and felt it spread through him. He turned slightly and saw Till set his own glass down.

"That was hell, Buck," Till said. "You feeling better?"

"Yes . . . I've got to go see about that wagon, the casket . . ."

"No. Stay away from there, Buck. I talked to the man Will Payne sent. Everything will be taken care of. In a little while now Rube's body will be on its way home."

Buck fought at the churning inside him. Home . . .

"Drink some more, Buck," Till said. "There's a time for whiskey. A man can only stand so much."

Buck drank again, feeling the slow, pleasant recoil of the whiskey going through his nerves and muscles. Its trenchant

power mellowed his senses and drove out some of the shock and hurt.

"Thanks, Till," he said. He spread his hands on the bar top, then clenched them. "I hit you, didn't I, Till? I'm sorry."

"Forget it. I know how you felt. You stay here until you get settled down, and then you ought to go see Wynona."

Buck looked at his old friend narrowly. "That sounds funny. Till, coming from you."

"Does it?"

"I figured you two were married by now. Isn't that the way you planned it?"

Till shrugged and set his empty glass down. "Sometimes, a man's plans fade out."

Stirrings of the old hurt, the bitterness, rose in Buck Caldeen. "So your pride did assert itself? You changed your mind."

The gambler smiled. "I didn't mean to start a discussion, Buck. You're still jumping at conclusions. I just suggested that you go and see her. She's down on the Row today. She might not be there tomorrow." Till drew out a small gold watch and looked at it. "There's a fast game coming up, Buck. I'm late already."

"Have a drink on me, Till."

"No, thanks. I'll be going," Till said. He lifted a hand in a brief gesture of farewell and turned and went out.

Buck poured himself another slug of whiskey.

The whiskey formed a cushion around his mind, and brought a feeling of well-being, of rightness with the world. This town could have been Dodge or Ellsworth three years before, and he was a tired cowhand, relaxing and forgetting the strain of the long Chisholm Trail.

But there was a difference. There was no anticipation in him for a night of carousal with trail-mates. This was trail's end and there was nothing ahead and no place he wanted to go.

He sat for a long time, drinking slowly, moodily. At last he got up and went out through the doorway. He paused at the edge of the walk; a wide-shouldered, dark man, unsmiling. Dried blood from the cut on his head showed below his temple, streaking down across his high-cheeked face.

He looked down the slope of the street toward the ferry, and saw the light spring wagon with the coffin on it go past the Old Commissary Building and on down to the ferry

wharf. Rube was on his way home, Buck thought; and Minnie was beside the driver, her shoulders looking frail and ineffectual under her long black scarf.

Buck turned his glance away and saw the rooftop of the first house on the Row. . . . So Till wants me to go see Wynona, he thought. Till has changed his mind about marrying her, but he still wants business for her. Till Petrie, always figuring percentages.

"I'm drunk," Buck muttered, and saw a hardware sign across the street getting blurred in his vision and knew that it was so.

But an urge for violence was growing in him, whether or not it was born of frustrated longing or the fumes of the whiskey. Why shouldn't I see Wynona? he thought.

He crossed the street slowly and turned toward the river, walking stiff and straight, each step deliberate. In spite of all his efforts, his bootheels had an occasional tendency to rock him on the uneven plank of the walk. The willows along the river looked like banks of green fog, and the water beyond them looked milky.

"I've never been this drunk before," Buck Caldeen thought.

Close at hand, the first house on the Row seemed larger, almost formidable. Buck turned the knob of the door and opened it and went in.

The reception room was a parlor, spacious and furnished with low cushioned seats and Queen Anne tables. There was a full-length mirror on the left of a narrow stairway, and pictures of different sizes adorned the walls.

Buck stopped and took off his hat, and heard a woman's voice raised in greeting. She was standing halfway down the stairs. She wasn't Wynona.

"Where's Wynona?" Buck asked.

"Wynona isn't feeling well. She's resting." The woman came down the staircase into better lighting, and Buck saw that she was short, full-bodied, blonde. "I'm filling in for her, today," she said.

"I came to see Wynona. Where is she?"

The woman took an involuntary look up the stairs. Buck started to move past her but she blocked his path.

"You can't go up there! We have a free girl in four."

"I'm not interested."

The blonde woman got shrill. "You're drunk, mister!

You've been fighting! What makes you think you can see Wynona, anyhow? You'd better get out of here!"

"Don't bother me," Buck muttered. His firm hand thrust her aside. His stride was erratic, but he had a feeling that there was strength in him, strength enough to tear this house to pieces and hurl it into infinity. He went up the staircase, holding to the rail, and looked back once to see the blonde woman staring at him. "Don't you do anything, sister," Buck said thickly, and turned and went on and reached the landing.

He stopped there, and some instinct drew his attention to a closed door on his left. It was a tall door with an open transom above it. He could hear someone moving about inside. He crossed to the door and knocked.

"Wynona."

The footsteps inside the room stopped abruptly and Wynona's voice came distinctly through the transom. "Is that you, Till?"

Even under the deadening clutch of the whiskey, Buck knew he should not feel this lashing fury against Till Petrie, but he felt it. It was so strong in him that for a moment he didn't trust himself to speak.

"Till?" Wynona called again. The door did not open. "Is that you, Till?"

Buck took a backward step, his shoulders bunching. Then he lunged forward, sending the weight of his body against the door. The lock broke free and the door swung violently open, sending him staggering into the room.

He straightened himself with an effort and wiped a hand across his eyes. The room was blurred in his vision, but he could see her. She hadn't made an outcry, but she had recoiled away from him, and now she stood with her back pressed against the edge of a marble-topped dresser. Her reflection in the mirror made four of her, but that was because of the whiskey. Buck eliminated that illusion by squinting; and then he saw that she was holding a short pistol in her hand and that the gun was pointing toward him.

She let the gun drop down and a shudder went through her. "Buck," she said weakly, "you almost made me kill you! Why did you break in here?"

What a puny little thing that pistol was, Buck thought. He watched her turn slightly and put it on top of the dresser. When she faced him again she looked composed, but she

seemed a great distance from him. Suddenly he was angered because the whiskey, taken fast on an empty stomach, was inexorably dulling his senses.

He said thickly, "You thought I was Till."

"Yes." She came toward him. "Buck, what has happened? You've been bleeding . . . Buck, you're drunk!"

"Am I?"

She stopped and stood looking at him, her eyes dark and searching. "This is . . . Rube's day, isn't it?" she said. "Has it . . . has it already happened?"

His mind shunted away from that. He laughed. "This is the first time I've ever been on the Row. I came to see you, Wynona."

Her eyes still searched him. "Why? Why did you come here, Buck?

He tried to laugh again, but there was no laughter in him. He fumbled in his pockets and finally drew out some of the money he had made trapping mink. His tongue was so thick he could barely get the words out. "Why do you think I came here? Take what you charge, out of this."

He felt her slap him across the mouth, but there was no pain in it, no physical pain. It was more like a deadening, paralyzing blow to his spirit. It brought neither anger nor resentment, but only a palpable sickness of soul and the same oppressive feeling he had been aware of in the clearing; the feeling of being lost in a dark world without horizons.

He dropped the money, but he was not aware of it. Wynona had moved back against the dresser again and she seemed miles from him. He felt a need to get out of this room, and yet there was reluctance in him, like dragging weights on his boots as he went toward the door.

He heard Wynona say something to him, and felt her hands on his arms, holding him back. He stopped and turned to look at her, vaguely surprised that she should be trying to stop him from leaving after slapping him in the mouth. Her eyes were luminous and shining with tears, too, and that was strange.

"Buck, you poor man!" she said. "What has happened to you? Aren't you able to tell me?"

His mind was erratic, bringing irrelevant things to his lips. "That blonde said you were resting. Don't you ever rest? Doesn't Till ever let you rest?"

She said unsteadily, "You don't know what you're saying, Buck. Come here. I'll put you to bed. You're sick."

"I'm drunk," he said, slowly and distinctly.

"Yes. Yes, you're drunk."

"I'm not sick. I'm drunk."

The floor was rocking under him, and there was no resistance in him as she pulled him toward the bed. He swiveled around and sat down on the bed, conscious of a growing lassitude and a desire for sleep. Dimly, he was aware of her, taking his hat and then kneeling to pull off his boots. He sank back. She takes good care of a man, he thought, and then the full stupor consumed his mind and he slept.

He came awake cold sober and found that he was under a sheet. He saw his hat on top of the dresser, and his shirt and trousers folded neatly over the back of a chair. His boots were beside the chair, no longer filmed with the dust of Indian Territory.

"Feeling better, Buck?"

He turned his head slightly and saw Wynona standing in the doorway leading to another room. She was wearing a fragile garment that looked like silk. The room behind her was dark, and it was only then that Buck knew he had awakened under the soft light of a candle. It was night.

"Yes, I feel better," he answered. Part of the things came back to him, shaming him. "I'm sorry I troubled you, Wynona."

She came and sat down on the edge of the bed beside him. She leaned over slightly to look at him and loose strands of her hair touched his face.

"You don't have anything to be sorry about, Buck," she said. "You came to me when you needed me, and I'm happy. I'm the one who should be sorry . . . sorry for the bitterness I've caused you, the misunderstanding."

Here close up, Buck saw that there were shadows under her eyes, but they only intensified her beauty. Her eyes held a lustrous darkness and her lips looked wide and soft. He looked at her and found himself incapable of thinking of things beyond her. What had she meant, about the bitterness, the misunderstanding? What did things like that matter?

Strange how it was with a man, Buck thought as he reached for her. The whiskey had left him nervous, but through that nervousness was a surging strength, and a need

that only a woman could fill. He drew the full length of her body against him and felt her warm breath touch his face an instant before he found her lips. She stirred in his arms and his strong hands moved swiftly. It was only then that he knew she had readied herself for him. There was nothing between them except her fragile, loosely-fitting garment of silk.

It was only later when the fast thoughts came, bringing their tension. She had gone to the other room while he dressed. He was putting on his hat when she came through the doorway again.

She said uneasily, "Take your hat off, Buck. You aren't leaving now. Sit down and wait. I'll go downstairs and bring up some coffee."

He hesitated, glancing around the room. She came on and took off his hat and placed it on top of the dresser. She looked at him once, long and searchingly, and then smiled and motioned toward a chair.

"I'll be back soon," she said, and left him.

He waited until her footsteps had faded down the stairs; then, turning slowly, he gave the room his full appraisal. It was a large room, neatly furnished, but the floor was cluttered with open suitcases and a battered old brass-bound trunk. The suitcases were filled with clothing. A framed picture lay face down on top of the trunk. Buck noticed the scrawled writing on its back, and he stooped to read it. *From Till to Wynona, with love.* He turned the picture over and looked at it, and suddenly there was a dryness in his mouth and a return of the old sickness. Till Petrie's dark eyes stared at him from the picture, and Till's words in the saloon came back to Buck. "She's down on the Row today. She might not be there tomorrow."

Buck thought bitterly, "Till has used her . . . how many men have used her? . . . and now Till's through with her and she'll have to go back home."

Buck reached for his hat and put it on again, and stood a moment in the silence. Rube's words about the pride of the Caldeens came back to him, but they were ineffectual, their warning lost to Buck. He turned abruptly and went out through the doorway and down the stairs. He hurried, dreading to meet Wynona returning with the coffee. The blonde woman rose from a couch in the reception room and stood staring at him. Buck passed her and opened the outer door.

"Rube's funeral will be tomorrow," he thought. "After that, I'm leaving for good."

He went through and closed the door softly and started walking toward Hare's Livery on Texas Road.

Eighteen

POLECAT CREEK WAS RUNNING HIGH WITH THE RAINS OF early April. The ford was deep and swift, swirling with logs and brush drifts. Buck's big roan breasted the current without faltering and climbed out on the muddy road leading home.

Rube Caldeen's funeral was over. Indians had left the cemetery in small groups, afoot and on horseback, disappearing along devious trails through the forest. George had followed Will Payne back to Longtown to purchase a supply of groceries.

George had taken the funeral gamely, his quiet face and square shoulders revealing the new courage that had come to him since his marriage to Sally. George had reached solid manhood, Buck thought. He no longer needed solace and guidance from an older brother.

I'll pack up tonight, Buck thought, and leave tomorrow.

Sally Caldeen had not gone to Rube's funeral. She hadn't wanted to look upon Rube's dead face, and George had respected her wishes. She had stayed at home with her young son.

The rain that had started early on the preceding night was dwindling, but the Low Gap hills were still obscured by mist and scudding clouds. Buck was nearing home when he saw a horse and rider coming toward him out of that misty grayness at the head of the rail-fenced lane. He slowed the roan, watching the rider approach swiftly. The rider lifted his head and swerved to the roadside.

Buck recognized Nate Partain.

Partain brought his mount to a skidding stop, but only for an instant. During that instant Buck saw the malignant shine of his eyes and the cynical twist of his lips, but neither of those evidences of hatred registered so much on Buck as did the fact that Nate was sober, sober and wary as something evil and feline. Then Nate wheeled his horse from the road and went crashing off through the woodland toward the mouth of Sunnygile Hollow.

Buck sent the roan at a lope toward the house, impelled by mounting suspicion. His suspicion was verified when he swung from the saddle at the front yard gate and saw Sally Caldeen standing in the doorway holding a shotgun.

She lowered the gun when she recognized Buck. Some of the stark fear went out of her face. She turned and went into the house. When Buck followed, he saw her kneeling at the baby's crib. He heard the choked sound she made, and knew she was crying.

"Has Nate Partain been here, Sally?" Buck asked.

She nodded without lifting her head.

"Why? What was he doing here?"

Her shoulders jerked convulsively, but she didn't answer. Buck stooped and caught her shoulders, lifting her and turning her to face him.

"What did Nate want, Sally?"

"He want me."

"What!"

"He say he want me. He say he need woman." She dug the knuckles of her hands into her eyes and stared down at the baby. "You no tell George, Buck! Never!"

"How long did Nate stay here, Sally?"

"He stayed little while. I get shotgun. I make him go."

"What else did he say to you, Sally?"

She freed herself and turned her back. "Nothing."

Resolutely, Buck turned her to face him again. "You'll have to tell me, Sally. I have to know."

"He say George gone. He say we have good time."

"Did he touch you, Sally?"

"I get 'way from him. I get gun."

"What did he do then?"

"He go."

"He didn't say anything else? Don't lie to me, Sally! You'll have to tell me!"

He watched the fear come up in her eyes, a fear so stark

and desperate that the sight of it shocked him. Her lips opened, but no sound came; one of her hands started pulling at a button on the front of her dress. When she spoke at last the words seemed forcefully wrung from her.

"He say George no-good man, like Rube. He say he hear Rube can't get child. He say Rube weak, kill Murch Kenton because Kenton strong man, get strong child, maybe with Minnie when Rube not home. . . ."

Buck said harshly, "Don't lie to me, Sally! Nate didn't mention Minnie, did he? Didn't he hint that maybe you'd been with Kenton?"

Sally reached out sudenly, her fingers digging into Buck's arms. "Rube tell you about Kenton, didn't he, Buck? . . . Now you tell George!"

Buck forced calmness into his answer. "No, Sally, I won't tell George. Rube told me the whole story about you and Kenton, but I'll never tell it. You've got to believe that, Sally. Rube died thinking the secret was safe, and that's the way we'll keep it. Now tell me the truth—everything Nate Partain said."

"He say maybe my strong son not George's son! He say maybe I have man before George! I grab shotgun. I say I kill him for that, but he run!"

"Did he accuse you of ever being with Kenton?"

"No. He just say maybe with some man before George, but I think he know! He swear in that court, he saw Rube kill Murch Kenton! Rube say no, but Rube could make mistake. Maybe Nate hide—watch—maybe he know!"

Buck glanced down at the baby, feeling the silence taking hold of the room like a creeping, insidious presence. The last drops of the dwindling rainfall pattered like cats' feet across the rough board roof of the house, and far away along the course of the creek came the rumble of heavy thunder.

"I'll have to get rid of Nate, Sally. I'll chase him down, run him out of the country. Whatever happens, don't ever weaken and tell George about your past. If you do, you'll ruin your lives and the life of your child. If you don't keep your lips sealed, Rube died for nothing."

"For our lives—for our son—I speak nothing. I tell Rube once I speak, maybe save him; but he say my talk will do no good. I never talk now. I never tell no one."

Buck turned to the peg on the wall and took down his gun and rigging. He buckled it on and went out swiftly. He

mounted and headed the big roan out through the lane. The tracks of Nate Partain's horse were distinct, soggy splotches on the muddy road, turning sharply northward into the darkly-green fold of the hills.

Sunlight touched Buck's shoulders through a rift in a passing cloud. The road swerved in a long loop and then pointed straight into Sunnygile Hollow. The tracks of Nate's horse were still visible, revealing a slowing that showed in the clear line of shod hooves and a lessening of the mud splashes. Buck sent the roan into a grueling run.

The clouds had vanished, and the lowering sun filled the forest with a transparent, golden light. The road narrowed and lifted, hugging the shoulder of the mountain; and suddenly, directly ahead of him, riding at a slow walk, Buck saw Nate Partain.

Buck slowed, but already the sound of his horse had reached Nate. Nate swiveled around in his saddle. He took a swift, startled look at Buck, and recognized him, and then faced ahead again and spurred his mount to a gallop.

Buck lifted the roan to a hard run again and watched the distance dwindle between them. Nate looked back again, his face tight and grim in the sunlight. He pulled his mount to the left, obviously thinking to head into the timber; then he thought better of it and took the sharp northward turn that led to the Partain ranch.

He was flinging himself from the saddle at the front yard gate when Buck pulled in on him.

Nate's efforts to open the gate were like those of some frantic animal clawing at the door of a cage. He cursed and fumbled, and all the while his eyes held upon Buck.

Buck said quietly, "I just want to talk to you, Nate."

Nate's hands got still and he straightened. Beyond him, standing in the doorway of the huge house, Buck saw Nate's father and mother. Still-faced, silent, they stood there staring at their son.

"What do you want to talk to me about, Caldeen?" Nate queried.

"You know what about, Nate."

Nate cursed. "Don't stall, Caldeen! What is it?"

Buck said calmly, "We could spare your parents, Nate. Ride with me a little ways. We'll talk then."

"Like hell I will! You want to get me off in the woods and shoot me . . . maybe like Rube shot Murch Kenton!"

"I don't want to kill you, Nate."

Nate opened the gate and went through and closed it. He stopped and faced Buck with a mounting belligerence. "I won't go a step with you, Caldeen! Start talking, or get out!"

"All right, Nate." Buck looked at the derelict's parents. "I hate to have to say this here. I'd like to spare you. But your son has just tried to attack my brother's wife, a young Indian mother. Unless he leaves this country and never comes back, I'll kill him. I ought to kill him now."

Nate's growing sureness was visible in the sideward-drawn twist of his lips. "Why don't you try it, Caldeen!? Try to shoot me, right here in my own front yard!"

Buck glanced at Nate's parents again, half wondering at their silence. Nate's mother had come to the edge of the porch, but she didn't speak.

"Go ahead, Caldeen!" Nate snarled. "Try to shoot me!"

"I will if you push me, Nate!"

The quietness, the calmness, had gone out of Buck Caldeen's voice. He pulled the roan around slightly and sat straight in his saddle, his view of Nate totally unencumbered. The bulk of the gun on his hip was squarely in front of Nate, like a menacing, deadly impact that filled Nate's glance.

"You'll leave here, Nate!" Buck said. "Not tomorrow or next day. Tonight! You'll pack up and go, and no one will ever see you in this country again. If I ever lay eyes on you again, I'll kill you. That isn't a threat. It's a statement of fact. You can accept it and keep living—or say one more word to me now, and be dead!"

Nate's face turned a pasty hue, like dough that has lain too long and soured. There was no real courage in him. There never had been, Buck knew.

"Give me your answer, Nate!" Buck pressed.

Nate dropped his head and said weakly, "I'll go. I'll go tonight!"

"All right," Buck said. "I'll be back tomorrow to check." He nudged the roan and made a slow circling turn, watching Nate go toward the steps of the porch. Then Buck faced ahead, settling in his saddle.

It must have been the choked, rasping sound of Nate's expelled breath that warned him. Buck jerked the roan to a standstill and turned and saw Nate wheeling and pulling his pistol.

Buck drew and fired from that awkward, half-turned stance and knew that his first shot had missed Nate. Nate's

pistol was free and frantically lifting. Buck steadied and fired again.

Wherever the slug had caught Nate, it downed him. He went down sideward and half spinning so that his head was toward his mother. His gun dropped far from him, as though his sideward lurch had helped him throw it. He lay still.

Buck rode back to the gate and looked down at him briefly. There was no visible sign that Nate was breathing. Nate's parents stood on either side of their son, looking at Buck without speaking.

Buck said with a deep, unfeigned sorrow, "I didn't want to do it." He waited a moment, expecting one of them to speak. They looked at him steadily; never once while he sat there did they glance down at their son. Buck turned his horse and rode away.

He passed the Garland dam on Sunnygile Creek and took a little-used trail through the timber, knowing that George should be nearing home from his trip to Longtown. He didn't want to meet George now. He crossed the flooded channel of Polecat Creek and sent the roan up the first long swell of the southerly foothills. When he struck the Bellefonte road at the summit of Eagle Mountain, he turned in the saddle once without slowing and looked back.

It was sundown when he rode into Longtown. He tied up at Will Payne's store and went in and turned his gun over to Will; then he sent word to Brad King that he was waiting to be taken to jail.

Epilogue

QUIETNESS IN THE FORT SMITH JAIL INTENSIFIED WITH THE advancing morning. Jake and Pete and Old Praying Mantis had become very still. Whatever sorrow Buck Caldeen felt for them was lost in his thoughts of Wynona Mapen. He stood at the window of his small steel cell, looking into the hills of the Cherokee Nation while memories crowded in on him.

"I wish you'd understand that about the Caldeen pride, Buck," Rube had said, and Rube's words kept haunting him. He had always felt a need for Wynona; a need that no other woman could ever fill. He had gone to her in a drunken stupor, and she had taken care of him. He had possessed her, and then had abandoned her because of his galling thoughts that she had been with other men. Yet, now that he was caught up close, he knew that his pride had been the thing that had always stood between them. Now that it was too late, he realized it fully, and the knowledge brought a deep soul-sickness that verged on despair.

He thought dully. A man grabs at the essentials when he is doomed. We could have had a good life together, at least this far. And in staying in my homeland, I might have helped to avert this tragedy. I might have spotted Murch Kenton for what he was before he had a chance at that brutal affair with Sally. . . .

Footsteps sounded in the corridor, but for a moment Buck didn't notice them. Then, as they neared and stopped, the shocked thought came to him that Jake and Pete and Old Mantis' time was up, and he remembered how it had been

with Rube. He turned slowly from the window and saw Brad King and the jailer and another man looking in on him.

"Morning, Buck," King said blandly. "Have you had about enough of this place?"

Buck stared at the marshal, unwilling to absorb the fact that King could indulge in such humor. However, King was offering his hand through the bars, and his smile was genuine. Buck took his hand briefly, then gave his attention to the neatly-attired man beside the marshal.

"Meet Bruce Warren," King said. "He's the lawyer I told you about. I thought last night he'd have a challenging case, but fortunately it's mighty puny. In another hour or so he'll have you out of here."

Buck felt a drenching chill go through him. When he took Bruce Warren's hand, he found that his own hand was shaking. He took a backward step and said with forced quietness, "I don't follow you, King."

"You will soon."

The lawyer smiled and said easily, "Just a few legal technicalities and it'll all be over. You won't even be arraigned."

Buck forced words through the dryness in his throat. "What about Nate Partain? I . . ." He stopped and stared at King.

"Nate Partain is alive, Buck. You didn't kill him. He stayed down when you shot him, playing 'possum. Don't you remember how he always did that when the chips were down?"

Buck nodded, gaining control of himself at last. Then suddenly another thought struck him and he said violently, "I meant to kill him! Nate—he can't live! He has to die!"

"Maybe he will. Maybe he'll hang, for two murders."

"Two murders?"

"Yeah. John Garland and Kick Youngbird. It's a long story, Buck, but I'll make it brief. Nora Garland lured her husband into the woods, and Nate killed him. Choked him to death. Nora took John's body in and told everybody that her husband had had a stroke. Old Kick happened to see Nora and John together that day, and he got suspicious when he saw Nate following them. Kick never got close enough to see what actually happened, but he saw Nora coming out of the woods with John's body across his horse, and later he saw Nate riding alone into Sunnygile Hollow. Old Kick, Indian-like, kept his mouth shut, hoping he'd find out some-

thing to verify his suspicions, but John was buried and he never did."

King paused for a moment, getting the essential facts straight in his mind, then went on swiftly. "Old Kick went to the Garland ranch one day and had a talk about cattlemen doing so much damage to the timber, burning and clearing. Unfortunately for him, he had that talk with the widow, and she got angry and mean.

"Kick got angry, too, I guess, finally. He let it slip to the widow that he suspected her of helping get rid of her husband, so she could be with Nate Partain. That slip doomed old Kick. The widow made Nate go that night and ambush him."

Buck said sharply, "King, how did you find this out?"

King said grimly, "Nate thought he was dying last night when I got there. He told it all."

"You mean . . . he incriminated himself?" Confessed all that? He wanted to clear his conscience?" Buck took a deep breath and shook his head. "I didn't believe Nate had a conscience."

"He hasn't. He didn't confess because his conscience was hurting him. He couldn't bear to die and let the secret die with him. He wanted Nora Garland to be rung in. He wanted to be sure she'd be punished. Nate didn't know it, but I had him tagged already, and I suspected the widow. You remember those five young Indians who used to run with old Kick? Well, for a year, they've been trying to find out why Kick was murdered. They finally hit on the right idea. They dug up John Garland's body and found evidence that he had been strangled to death, his neck twisted so violently it was broken. One of them rode to Longtown, and had me go to the graveyard and have a look. I knew then that Garland had been murdered. I was working on the case when you got to Nate and shot him. I guess you'd figured the answers long before I did."

"No."

King stared at Buck. "No? Then why did you try to kill him?"

"I'm sorry, Brad, but I can't tell you. I'll tell you another thing, though. If Nate isn't brought here and hanged—fast—I'll kill him yet. I have to."

"Just because you hate him, Buck? Because he testified against Rube? Because . . ." King stopped, then went on slowly, "That's something else I meant to tell you. I pinned

Nate down last night. I thought since he'd started talking, he might as well let us know the truth about everything. I made him confess that everything he told at Rube's trial was perjury. He didn't see Rube kill Murch Kenton! He told me last night that he was here in a Fort Smith hotel that day, dog drunk. I checked with the hotel clerk awhile ago and made sure he was telling the truth. His name on the register and the date he stayed there checks out just like he told it."

Buck felt the quick-rushing sense of thankfulness, of freedom. "Nate's yours, then, Marshal," he said. "I don't want him."

King's expression was still vaguely puzzled, but he wasn't going to push it. "Buck, I hope you realize what all this means to the Indians. Nora Garland is gone, probably back to Kansas City. She must have seen that grave, the way it had been disturbed, and got panicky. But she'll be brought back to answer to charges. Whether she's convicted or not, her hold on the hills is broken. The Partain's are moving out, and you can bet your life that other cattlemen won't be rushing into the Low Gaps. That dam on Sunnygile Creek will be torn out. Why, fifty years from now there won't be any traces of it."

"That's the way Indians need things, Brad," Buck said. "Log cabins in the hills, or fine homes if they want to build them. Freedom, not servility. When a race of people have to ask for the very means of survival, instead of having the privilege of going out and doing their own things with their own hands, those people are weakened and at last destroyed."

"Yes. I can see you feel strong about that, Buck. And I guess you'll be a part of it. You have friends, Buck . . . people who'll give you every chance, all the help you'll need. Men like Will Payne, who has always been a friend of the Indians. Even men like Till Petrie. I stopped at his place last night on my way back to the hills. He said he'd go all out to help you in your trouble. He'll be glad to know you won't need his help in this."

Buck nodded. "Till's all right."

"Yeah . . . Buck, we'll see you right away. You brought a killer to justice, and you'll be exonerated for shooting him. I asked you to work for me once, and somehow, I feel you have."

Buck sat on his bunk after they had gone, absorbing it all with a growing wonder, and thinking of Brad King's strength. The marshal had been wrong about Kick Youngbird's mur-

der, and about the trouble he had thought was brewing in the hills among the Indians. Yet, the marshal hadn't mentioned that, hadn't made excuses. He had been wrong, but he had been striving for right, and he could go his way with assurance.

Buck thought abruptly, happily, I'll be free soon, and I'll see Wynona. Then his next thought stilled him. She might not want to see me now. . . .

He was sitting that way, quiet-faced and somber, when Till Petrie came in.

Till said without preliminaries, "How bad is it, Buck?"

Buck rose and offered his hand through the bars and Till Petrie took it. "It's about over, Till. I'll be free in an hour or so." He told Till the story, then said feelingly, "I appreciate your coming here. It shows what kind of man you are, deep down."

Till's black eyes had a shining brilliance. "I came for another reason, too," he said determinedly. "It's about time you stopped letting a woman tear her heart out. Wynona's out front now, but she wouldn't come in until I found out how you felt. She's a one-man woman, Buck. You've been blind not to see it. We've been close, but she wouldn't have anything to do with me in the way I wanted it. No man on the Row has touched her! She ran that place for me, to make money, but she didn't mean to stay there for long. She was estranged from her folks, heart-sick and despondent, but she's a strong woman and she wants to make her own way. . . . And she wants one man. She always has. Do you want her?"

"Yes," Buck said steadily. "I want her, and you didn't have to tell me the things you have. I've felt it, ever since . . ." Buck paused. There were some things a man shouldn't mention. "I've known it for a long time, but my pride and jealousy wouldn't let me admit it."

"You'll see her now?"

Buck waited a moment, conscious of happiness greater than he had ever known.

"Not here," he said at last. "You tell her to get her things together and rent a horse and buggy from Hare's Livery on Texas Road. Tell her . . . tell her to meet me down at the Ferry wharf, about one hour from now. We're . . . Till, you tell her we're going home!"

THE END

HOME FOR THE HANGING

Buck Caldeen came back to the Indian Territory to find his brother doomed to hang for murder. He had shot a man in the back—no defense was possible, and he refused to talk.

Driven b[illegible]nd pride, Buck set out to uncc[illegible]story, in a last, desper[illegible]ng his brother's life.

His se[illegible]hi[illegible]down strange trails —to a man[illegible]ungry widow . . . to the "madam" of the most notorious house in town . . . to a desecrated grave . . .

Buck Caldeen found the secret he was after—and he would have given anything not to know it . . .

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